Mirovend`s Legacy

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Blackreed

The Castle of Blackreed stood like a forgotten sentinel atop a low, wind-scoured hill in the western Brecklands. Its stones, dark gray and soot-black, bore the wear of seven centuries—scarred by storms and sieges, but still unbroken. Moss clung to the cracks in the walls, and the air smelled of iron, damp earth, and old smoke. Despite its age, the castle still served a purpose: a gathering point for wandering blades, rootless warriors, and the desperate, all drawn by the whisper of coin and contracts.

It was not grand by any means. The outer wall formed a squat ring, enclosing a narrow courtyard where a training yard, stables, a blackened smithy, and a cramped barracks shared space. The main keep rose only three stories, with narrow windows and a crenellated top. Within the bailey stood the Anvil, a crooked little inn leaning against the western wall. With only four battered tables and a single hearth, it served cheap ale and warm broth for those not yet sent to their deaths.

Lord Ruimund ruled here, though the word "ruled" was too strong. He commanded with the quiet weight of memory, not might. A thin man with a parchment complexion, his gray beard spilled like unkempt wool over a dull red surcoat. He walked slowly, leaning on a knotted cane, eyes sharp behind drooping lids. His voice, though soft, carried the firm steel of command.

"Gather them in the yard," he said to one of his scribes that morning. "Those newly come. We'll see what they're made of."

One by one, from the dusty roads of the Brecklands, warriors arrived. Gorg, with arms like tree trunks and a beard braided in rings of bone, trudged through the gate, axe over his shoulder. Gobol followed soon after, shorter and leaner, but with the same watchful glare under a helm of dented iron. Folga came quietly, wrapped in her ram-emblazoned cloak, her eyes darting between the towers, the yard, the men. Yvanna slipped in unnoticed, her footsteps barely disturbing the gravel, a bow strapped across her back and a dagger at her side.

The courtyard filled with others—rough men, mercenaries, bounty hunters—and soon Ruimund appeared on the keep steps.

"You've come for work," he said, voice steady. "We have it. But I do not send fools to die."

He turned and gestured toward the far end of the yard. A broad-chested man stepped forward, a scar slashing from his temple to the corner of his lip. This was Guldo, the battle master, his chainmail dark with sweat, his sword already drawn.

"You'll be sorted by skill," Guldo growled. "Step forward when I call. Show me you're worth the bread."

The testing began. Warriors clashed wooden blades, shields splintered, bruises bloomed. Gorg and Gobol each held their own, trading blows with practiced economy. Folga cast small illusions, deftly slipping away from incoming strikes, her magic controlled and sharp. Yvanna danced through her opponent's guard, a flick of her dagger at a vulnerable side. She didn't boast—none of them did.

When the sun reached its peak, Guldo wiped his brow and spoke with Ruimund. The old lord nodded.

"You four," he pointed with his cane, "Gorg, Folga, Gobol, Yvanna—step forward."

The named did so, glancing at one another. Strangers still.

"You are now a unit. There is work, and you'll face it together. Report to the barracks and wait for your orders."

With that, the party of four—took their first steps toward something unknown, bound by coin and chance in the weathered bones of Blackreed.

The barracks of Blackreed Castle were low-roofed, poorly lit, and smelled of old sweat, oil, and boiled leather. A row of cots lined the stone walls, and near the far end, a desk stood beneath a narrow slit of a window. Behind it lounged a man who looked as if he belonged more in a tavern brawl than in charge of any military ledger.

Elmond, the barracks master, had his feet up on the table, one boot half-unlaced, chewing noisily on an apple and spitting bits of skin onto the floor. His thick fingers held a crude wooden mug from which he took deep swigs of ale between bites. A heavy leather-bound ledger lay open before him, stained and dog-eared. He occasionally scratched into it with a blunt quill, smearing ink as he wrote.

When the four approached, Elmond didn't look up at first. He finished his mouthful, spat a seed, then glanced over the apple at the newcomers.

"Well, you lot look like someone's bad dream," he muttered. "Names."

"Gorg," said the bearded dwarf, voice like crushed gravel.

"Gobol," the second dwarf answered.

"Folga," said the elf, her voice sharp and cool.

"Yvanna," the human said shortly, glancing around the room.

Elmond grunted and scribbled into the ledger, his quill squeaking on the page.

"You're the ones for the Reedhollow business," he said, flicking a bit of apple from his beard. "Small job. Dirty work. Some orcs crept out of their stinking holes, slipped into Wraithfen two nights back. Broke into a house, stole a woman. Took some food and coin too, but the girl's the prize."

He took a long drink, wiped his mouth with his sleeve, and leaned forward.

“Lord Ruimund wants her back. Says she’s the daughter of some miller or goat herder, doesn’t matter. You’re to head to Reedhollow Forest. Track the orcs, kill what you must, and bring the girl back if she’s still breathing. You get twenty gold for the job. Ten if she’s dead but you bring back proof you found her. Nothing if you vanish.”

None of the party spoke, but they nodded.

Elmond waved a lazy hand. “Get going then, or take a piss and a drink first. You’ll find no comfort in those woods.”

Outside, the air had turned cooler. They walked silently through the courtyard, boots crunching gravel, and made their way to the Anvil. Inside, the inn was dim, lit by a pair of crooked lanterns. The place stank of spilled ale and boiled vegetables. A burly halfling stood behind the counter, arms like hams and a face ruddy with heat and irritation. He barked into the kitchen.

“Soup, Marla! The carrot one, before it burns again!”

The kitchen girl squeaked in response. The halfling turned, wiped his hands on his apron, and grunted at the new arrivals.

“Light ale?” he asked. “Don’t expect flavor.”

They each gave a nod or coin without a word. Moments later, he brought out four chipped mugs of a flat brown liquid that tasted as if it had been strained through horse blankets. They drank anyway, in silence, sitting at a sticky table beside a wall adorned with a badly stuffed boar’s head and a crooked deer skull with only one antler. The air was thick with stale food and the creak of the inn’s crooked ceiling beams.

Gorg slammed his mug down on the grimy table, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and spat onto the floor with a grunt.

“This ale tastes like horse piss,” he growled, eyeing the halfling innkeeper, who ignored the comment entirely. “We have to march out soon. My name’s Gorg—well met. I hope we find the woman alive. Would be a shame if we’re just dragging a body back.”

Folga nodded, her cloak drawn around her despite the inn’s warmth. “It’s two days’ walk to Reedhollow Forest,” she said. “If we don’t want to be chewing on moss and roots, we should bring some food. Hard bread, dried meats. I’ve some fruit in my pack, but it won’t last.” She looked around the table. “I’m Folga. I work with spells.”

Gobol raised his mug and downed what remained of the foul ale with a loud slurp. Half of it missed his mouth and soaked into his beard. He coughed, wiped his chin with his sleeve, and gave a lopsided grin.

“Gobol,” he said. “I smash things.”

Yvanna leaned back slightly, legs crossed under the table, and ran a finger around the rim of her mug. “I’m Yvanna. We’ll get those orcs,” she said with a smirk. “Kidnappers are usually lazy. They don’t cover their tracks well.”

“We’ll need to be ready for a night or two in the woods,” Folga added. “I have some healing and mana potions, but not enough for a real fight.”

“I’ve got my share of bruises over the years,” said Gorg. “Never relied much on potions, but it’s good to know we’ve got ‘em. Anyone know the fastest way to the forest?”

“There’s a cattle trail just east of the Wraithfen road,” Yvanna said. “Cuts the distance by half a day, but it’s moist in parts. We’ll have to keep an eye out for sinkholes and wild dogs.”

Gobol snorted. “Mud’s fine, long as there’s something to fight at the end of it.”

Folga gave a slight smile. “Let’s just hope we don’t run into more than orcs. There’ve been goblin raids further north. Could be the forest’s crawling with more than we bargained for.”

Gorg cracked his knuckles and stood. “Then let’s make sure we’ve got what we need. Food, torches, extra arrows. We march at first light.”

They all nodded in agreement, the tension softening just slightly now that words had been exchanged. Outside, the wind pressed against the castle walls like a restless spirit.

The party left Blackreed before the sun had fully broken through the clouds. The castle loomed behind them like a dark tooth on the horizon as they followed a narrow animal trail winding southeast. The path was barely more than a beaten line through grassy meadows and gentle hills, flanked by tall grass and thickets of wild berries. Occasionally, a rabbit darted from the brush and vanished into the undergrowth. A fox lay curled beneath a bush, one eye half-open as the party passed, indifferent to their mission.

The weather was thick with clouds, a gray dome overhead that muted the landscape’s colors. The air was mild, though heavy with the promise of rain. At times, the trail grew uneven, with rocks hidden beneath tufts of grass, and more than once, Gorg or Gobol muttered curses as their boots caught or slipped.

After a while, as the group settled into their walking rhythm, Yvanna began to hum. Then, with a soft voice, she started to sing—an old village tune with a lilting, almost teasing melody. Her voice carried through the still air, rising above the rustle of the grass. The song had no words at times, only whistles and short phrases, but it was bright, like a splash of sunlight on a cloudy day.

“Hrm-hm-hm, ho-ho-ho,” Gobol rumbled along, thumping the haft of his short sword against his thigh in rhythm. “Hey, fox in the bush, what’s in the pot? Nothing but carrots and a lucky shot!”

Gorg grinned slightly. “You sing like a mule getting kicked, Gobol.”

“Better than marching in silence like a funeral,” the other dwarf shot back.

Folga just smiled faintly and kept her eyes on the trail ahead, occasionally adjusting the strap on her spellbook.

By dusk, the hills had flattened slightly and the sky darkened further. A breeze picked up, rustling the grasses and carrying the distant scent of rain. They found a cluster of thick bushes by the side of the trail and decided it was as good a place as any to make camp. Gorg gathered dry twigs and stones while Gobol struck sparks from flint. Soon a small fire crackled in the shelter of the brush, sending flickers of orange into the dimming air.

They sat around it, cloaks pulled tighter, the firelight casting long shadows.

“This weather’s gonna turn,” Gorg said, poking at the flames with a stick. “Hope it holds off till morning.”

“It’s the Brecklands,” Folga replied, warming her hands. “Could rain, could clear, could spit snow on us and then send a rainbow.”

Gobol let out a grunt. “As long as it don’t spit orcs, I’m fine.”

Yvanna leaned back on her elbows. “You think she’s still alive? The woman?”

Folga was quiet a moment. “Hard to say. Orcs don’t usually take prisoners. Unless they need leverage, or...” she trailed off.

“Or what?” asked Gorg.

“Or if they’re trying to draw someone out. A trap, maybe,” she said.

Gobol tossed a twig into the fire. “We’ll deal with whatever they’re planning.”

Yvanna nodded. “Still, I’d like to bring her back. Whole. Not just for the coin.”

“Same here,” Gorg said. “Dead folks deserve peace, but the living need saving.”

They sat in silence after that, the fire crackling and the wind brushing through the grass. Above them, the clouds swirled low and dark, but no rain came—yet. They’d march again at first light.

The morning broke softer than expected, the clouds thinning to wisps and the air warming gently as the party continued their march. The trail sloped gently through low grassy ridges, with birds flitting overhead and the occasional breeze stirring the tall grass. The forest of Reedhollow was now a thin, dark line on the horizon—quiet, looming, and still a half day’s walk away.

“So,” Gorg said, stretching his back with a grunt, “where are you all from? Noticed none of you have the look of city folk.”

“I’m from Bogwater,” he answered himself after a pause. “Small place, lotta mud, lotta frogs. Good stew, if you know whose pot to eat from.”

Gobol gave a proud thump to his chest. “Ashborrow. Bit west of here. Rocky fields, goat herders. You fall as a child, you fall on stone.”

Folga adjusted the strap on her cloak and spoke lightly. “Mireford, near the eastern marshes. Lots of rain, more than here. I learned spells from an old hedge witch who brewed potions that could make your toes glow.”

Yvanna smiled faintly. “Greenshore. By the lake. We had orchards and clear water. Not much else. I used to fish as a girl and shoot apples off the fence posts.”

They walked on, the path sloping downward through a field thick with purple wildflowers.

“You know,” Gorg said, glancing at the horizon, “Wraithfen—I’ve been there. Stopped once to visit my cousin Runa. Made a day of it, eating porridge and fresh bread, and she gave me jars of her apple jam. Still the best I’ve had.”

Folga looked over. “Could be your cousin knows the kidnapped woman.”

“Might be,” Gorg nodded. “Wraithfen folk know each other well. Runa’s lived there her whole life. She’s got a farm on the southern edge—stone fence, apple trees, couple goats, hens running around like they own the place. Makes jam from those apples, thick and sweet, just a touch of spice in it. I took a whole sack of jars back with me. Lived on jam and bread for six moons.”

Gobol chuckled. “That why your arms are so thick, or the jam turned to stone in your belly?”

Gorg laughed. “Might be both. Runa’s farm’s been in the family for generations. She took it over when her folks passed, and she’s kept it up on her own. Tough as old bark, that one.”

He paused, then grinned. “But let me tell you about her mule. Stupidest creature I’ve ever seen. Name’s Loff. Thinks he’s a rooster. Every morning, Runa says, he gets up and brays at the chickens. Stands right on the water trough and tries to crow. One time I watched him try to bite the windmill. Just stood there, snapping at the blades like they owed him money.”

Yvanna laughed. “Sounds like someone put a spell on him.”

“More like dropped him on the head as a foal,” Gorg replied. “Still, Runa keeps him around. Says he’s good company when he’s not chasing shadows.”

The group laughed quietly, the mood lifted by the tale. The sun had pushed through the morning haze now, and the air grew warmer with each step. The distant forest of Reedhollow was clearer—dark and tall, trees packed close like spears. Soon, the grass would give way to roots and shade.

They walked on, stories trailing behind them like smoke, the path ahead narrowing toward the unknown.

The edge of Reedhollow Forest loomed with tall, twisted trees that leaned into one another as if whispering secrets. The air changed as the party stepped off the grassy meadow path—cooler, heavier, tinged with the earthy scent of damp bark and moss. The sun faded behind the canopy, casting long shadows across the undergrowth. A light mist clung to the ground, swirling around their boots.

“Looks like they went this way,” Yvanna said quietly, crouching by a set of prints in the soft soil. “Bare feet, heavy stride. Not human. Too wide.”

Gorg knelt beside her, nodding. “Orc tracks. Three of them, maybe four. And here...” he pointed at a lighter print, dragged and uneven. “Someone smaller, not moving with their own strength. They’re carrying her.”

Folga stood a few paces back, clutching her cloak tighter around her shoulders. “The air’s colder in here. Strange how the mist clings to the roots. I don’t like the feel of it.”

Gobol wandered a few steps off the path to relieve himself into a patch of bushes. “Can’t track orcs with a full bladder,” he muttered. When he returned, he saw Yvanna popping a few red berries into her mouth.

“Sure those aren’t poison?” he asked.

“If they were, I’d already be choking,” she replied dryly, wiping her fingers on her sleeve.

They moved deeper into the woods, following the muddy footpath that twisted through groves of crooked trees. Branches clawed at their cloaks, and wet leaves clung to their boots. At one point, Yvanna stepped straight into a deep puddle hidden by fallen leaves. She hissed through her teeth.

“Damn this muck,” she muttered, lifting her foot and trying to shake the water out of her boot. “Feels like I’m walking in a soup bowl.”

“Better wet feet than a spear in your back,” Gorg said without turning.

The forest quieted around them. Only the occasional caw of a distant crow broke the silence. High above, the wind stirred the canopy, but down below, it was still—unnaturally still. Then Gobol pointed.

“There,” he said, voice low. “A deer.”

Through the trunks, a young deer stood watching them, ears twitching, head tilted. After a moment, it turned and walked calmly away, vanishing into the mist like a shadow.

Yvanna narrowed her eyes. “Animals don’t usually stand still when we’re around. It’s watching something.”

“They feel things we don’t,” Folga murmured. “I wonder what else is watching.”

Gorg examined the next set of tracks, now deeper as the mud thickened. “Still fresh. These orcs aren’t far ahead. I don’t see signs of a camp yet, but they’re not trying to cover their trail either.”

“They might not expect pursuit,” Folga said. “Or they think no one dares follow them into the forest.”

“They’d be wrong,” Gobol grunted, adjusting his grip on his short sword.

They pressed on, boots squelching in the wet path, eyes alert. Somewhere ahead, beyond the mist and trunks, lay the fate of a missing villager—and whatever waited beside her.

The deeper they moved into Reedhollow, the thicker the mist became. It curled like smoke around their legs and stretched across the forest floor in long, silver tendrils. The trail of prints they'd followed began to split, then vanish altogether, swallowed by leaf-fall and rain-softened earth. Three narrow paths wound off into different directions, none clearly marked, all wrapped in fog.

“Tracks split here,” Yvanna said, frowning as she crouched. “Could be a trick.”

“Or just the orcs moving to confuse anyone chasing,” Gorg muttered, staring into the gloom.

“They’re clever like that,” Folga added. “Crude, but not stupid.”

“Let’s follow the strongest trail,” Gobol said. “Footprints veer that way.”

They pressed onward, stepping carefully. At times, the prints faded entirely, leaving them peering at broken branches and overturned leaves for clues. Hours slipped by as the forest grew dim. The mist thickened, clinging to their faces, curling into their cloaks.

By late evening, they were exhausted, shivering, and no closer to finding their quarry.

“We stop here,” Gorg said firmly, gesturing to a mossy patch beneath a tangle of wide-armed trees. “No fire. If they’re close, we don’t want to give ourselves away.”

Rain began to fall, light at first, then steadier, drumming softly on the forest canopy. It slipped through the leaves in cold droplets, tapping against Yvanna’s leather armor with an irregular rhythm. The dwarves' helmets echoed with the steady pattering of water, like distant bells in a forgotten chapel.

Gorg sat heavily on a tree root and leaned back against the trunk, lifting his head.

“Water’s water,” he said, sticking out his tongue and letting the rain drip from the brim of his helmet into his mouth. “Better than dying thirsty.”

Yvanna sat close by, brushing damp hair from her face. “There’s more berries,” she said, reaching into a bush and plucking a few. “Still sweet.”

Folga leaned in beside her and took a handful. “I hope they’re not the kind that makes you see demons,” she said, chewing slowly.

“Don’t worry,” Yvanna replied. “If I see demons, I’ll let you know.”

Gobol crouched with his back to a log, arms crossed. “Rain’s better than arrows. No one’s dying yet.”

The forest around them was pitch black now, except for a faint, silvery light filtering through the mist from the hidden moon. The trees stood tall and silent, like petrified giants, and the air was thick with the scent of wet bark and old leaves.

None of them slept. They waited, crouched under dripping branches, eyes wide to the dark, listening for movement—of boots, of beasts, of anything that did not belong.

The rain continued through the night, but toward dawn, the mist began to loosen its grip. Shapes grew clearer. The forest floor emerged from beneath its veil, and the faintest glow of morning filtered down from above.

“Back on our feet,” Gorg said as he stood, stretching his shoulders with a grunt. “We’ve got daylight now, and the tracks won’t wait.”

“They went north,” Yvanna said, pointing to a series of new scuffs in the mud just beyond the bush. “Still moving. And heavy-footed.”

“Then so do we,” Folga said, brushing moss from her cloak.

Together, wet, cold, but unbroken, the party pressed deeper into Reedhollow.

The mist clung stubbornly to the edges of the forest, though the morning light pushed deeper now, revealing more of Reedhollow's tangled heart. The party moved in silence, stepping carefully on the damp, uneven path, eyes ever alert. After several hours of tracking fresh prints and broken twigs, a thin trail of smoke rose ahead through the trees, barely visible between the trunks.

Yvanna raised a hand to halt the group. They dropped into a crouch among the bushes, and slowly crept forward, moving across moss-covered ground with the stealth of shadows. Every footfall was placed with care. No snapped branches, no sudden rustles—only the occasional drip of rainwater from high above.

They reached a thicker patch of brush and peered through.

Five orcs sat around a fire in a crude clearing, clad in piecemeal leather armor patched with fur and bone. They were laughing and tearing meat from skewers, the fire crackling as fat dripped into the flames. Nearby, a human woman lay on the ground, soaked through from the night’s rain, her limbs drawn close to her chest. Her clothes were dirty, hair plastered to her face. She shivered uncontrollably, but her eyes were open, staring blankly into the fire.

One of the orcs tossed a bone in her direction and laughed as it bounced off her shoulder. Another mocked her with a guttural voice, mimicking a human plea for help, which made the others bark with cruel amusement.

The party ducked lower.

“There’s five of them,” Gorg whispered. “Leather armor, but not alert. I see two blades, one axe, and spears lying nearby.”

“They’re relaxed. Not guarding,” Yvanna said. “Perfect for a split approach.”

“I’ll go left with Folga,” Gorg said, eyeing the terrain. “That fallen log can give us cover.”

“Gobol and I go right,” Yvanna nodded. “We’ll get behind the big one with the axe.”

“We go on the signal,” Folga added. “Bird whistle. Keep it short, one call.”

They split silently, circling the clearing like wolves. Gorg and Folga crawled through brush and crept behind a thicket, staying low. Folga had a spell ready in her fingers, her eyes gleaming under the hood. Yvanna and Gobol flanked the other side, sliding between ferns and gnarled roots until they found cover behind a cluster of trees.

The orcs continued their meal, laughing louder now, speaking in rough tongues. One stood to stretch, oblivious to the eyes closing in from the dark.

Then it came—a single, sharp cuckoo’s whistle, high and brief.

The bushes erupted.

Gorg charged with a roar, his battleaxe gleaming in the firelight. He brought it down in a sweeping arc, cleaving into the back of an orc just as it turned, splitting leather and spine. Blood sprayed onto the moss as the creature crumpled.

Folga raised her hand, and a flash of blue light surged forth—an arcane bolt that struck another orc in the chest, sending it stumbling into the fire. Flames caught its cloak, and it howled as it fell, rolling and shrieking.

On the other side, Gobol bellowed and drove his short sword deep into the gut of a seated orc, pinning it to the ground before stomping its chest with a crunch of ribs. Yvanna danced past him, fast and low, slashing at an orc’s thigh and then driving her dagger into its neck before it could react. It fell gurgling, clutching at its throat.

The last orc rose, grabbing a spear and backing toward the woman. “No closer!” it roared, eyes wild.

Folga stepped forward, her voice calm. “You should’ve run sooner.”

She hurled another spell—this one a burst of light that blinded the orc. Gorg finished the job, axe crashing down across its collarbone, driving it to the forest floor.

Silence fell, broken only by the crackle of fire and the soft sob of the woman on the ground.

They looked around—five orcs lay dead, the camp ruined. The rain had washed much of the forest clean, but now blood soaked the earth anew.

With the battle over and the smoke from the fire beginning to drift aimlessly into the forest, the party moved quickly to search the fallen orcs. Gorg crouched and pulled a pouch from one of the bodies, spilling out its contents into his calloused hand.

“Fifty silver pieces,” he said. “Split it later.”

He rummaged further and found a crude amulet hanging around the neck of the largest orc—a loop of blackened bone with a cloudy, glassy stone set in its center. He turned it in his fingers, inspecting it.

“Ugly thing,” Gobol grunted.

“I like it,” Gorg said with a grin, slipping it over his head. The amulet swung against his chest as he stood. “Might bring luck. Or a rash.”

Meanwhile, Yvanna knelt beside the woman, who was still curled on the damp ground, her arms bound in rough rope. Yvanna cut the bindings and gently helped her sit up.

“You’re safe now,” she said. “Can you walk?”

The woman blinked, shivering. “I—I think so. Thank you. My name’s Milda. I thought they were going to—”

“Easy,” Yvanna said, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and helping her stand. Milda staggered slightly, her legs unsteady after so much time on the cold forest floor.

Folga checked the camp while Gobol grinned at the fire. “Look at this,” he said, pulling a roasted deer leg from the spit. “They could cook, I’ll give ‘em that.” He sniffed it, nodded approvingly, and slung it over his shoulder.

Gorg moved to the fire and grabbed a flask from one of the orc corpses. He unscrewed the top, sniffed the contents, then poured it slowly over the flames. The fire hissed and died, leaving behind a curl of steam and blackened ash.

“Let’s move before more show up,” he said.

The party retraced their steps, guiding Milda along the trail they had come. The forest remained silent, the mist clinging low again by late afternoon. As the light dimmed, they found another mossy patch beneath a thick old oak and settled in for the night. No fire this time. Just the deer leg, split between them.

Gobol tore at the meat with satisfaction. “Not bad for stolen food.”

Yvanna handed Milda a chunk wrapped in a cloth. “Here. Eat.”

Milda nodded gratefully and chewed slowly. After a moment, Folga asked gently, “What did the orcs want with you, Milda?”

She swallowed hard. “They... they said they were going to cook me. Wanted to know what human meat tasted like. But I think one of them was joking. Another said they just didn’t

have enough women in their village anymore." Her voice trembled. "I don't know what was true. They laughed at me a lot. Mocked me. But they didn't hurt me."

The party sat in silence for a time, the only sound the distant call of a nightbird and the chewing of meat.

Gorg finally muttered, "Monsters."

After eating, sleep took them quickly. They lay back against moss and root, stomachs full, cloaks pulled close, and the forest around them wrapped them in damp silence.

Morning came with pale light. They woke, stretched, and pressed on, leading Milda back through the woods. It took another day and a half to reach the outer hills. The mist grew thinner, the path more familiar. At last, the distant dark shape of Blackreed Castle rose once more on the horizon.

As the distant silhouette of Blackreed Castle crept nearer with each hour of travel, the path widened and the forest thinned to patches of hardy trees and scattered stone markers. The sun had broken through the clouds, and the wet glisten on leaves began to fade. Gorg walked with a steady pace beside Gobol, his axe slung over his shoulder, the newly acquired bone amulet swaying on his chest. His mind wandered, as it often did after battle, to deeper things than blades and blood.

"You ever think on the King, Gobol?" Gorg asked, glancing sideways. "Rugimund the Fourth. Blackbeard."

Gobol grunted. "Can't say I've ever met him."

"Few have," Gorg said. "But he's the rightful king, make no mistake. Took the crown after killing Beogul Stonewall in the Battle of Redbridge. Swung his sword through Beogul's helm like it was made of pastry."

Gobol's eyes lit. "That was twenty years back, eh?"

"Twenty-three," Gorg corrected. "Rugimund's the son of Sigismund the Just, remember? And Sigismund—his blood runs back through kings and warriors. All the way to Mirovend, twenty generations past. You know the tale, don't you?"

Gobol nodded slowly. "Dragon-slayer, right?"

"Aye," Gorg said, pride flickering in his voice. "Valathron, the Stormfire. That beast razed the lands from Daggerhold to Blackreed. Towns turned to ash, flocks devoured, skies black with smoke for months. Mirovend was just a prince then. Not yet king. But he rode out with five others, all armed with spears blessed by the high temple at Eldarreach. Only he came back."

"And the dragon?" Gobol asked.

“Dead,” Gorg said. “Skull was mounted at the gates of Highfort, though time’s crumbled it to bone dust now. After that, the lords of the land—thirty-three of them—gathered at Silverhall. They made a pact. Swore by the old stones and river gods that whoever brought peace through strength and service to the people should rule. Mirovend was chosen by their decree. Became the first true king of Breckland and Zarothia united.”

Gobol scratched his chin. “Breckland I know. But Zarothia?”

“It lies east of the Grayplate Mountains,” Gorg replied. “More hills, red soil, strong wine. Their people are quieter, more cunning. It took Mirovend thirty years of war to unite them. Skirmishes, truces, broken alliances, backstabbing lords. He was smart. Fought half with steel, the rest with words and marriages.”

“Sounds like a dwarf,” Gobol muttered with a grin.

Gorg chuckled. “He was half-dwarf, by some claims. His mother came from the Stonevale Clans, though the royal scrolls don’t talk much about that. After the wars, Mirovend married his cousin Leda—daughter of the Daggerhold Duke. Seven children they had. Raised them each to rule one of the seven provinces: Blackreed, Daggerhold, Highfort, Eldarreach, Windmere, Zar’s Hollow, and Thistlemarch.”

“And now there’s fifteen?” Gobol asked.

“Aye. Time breaks all borders,” Gorg said. “Provinces split, heirs warred with each other, some lines died out, others rose. But every king since Mirovend has worn the Black Crown and held court in Highfort. Rugimund is of that same line. And the blood of dragon-slayers still runs in his veins.”

Gobol whistled low. “Didn’t know all that.”

“Not many do,” Gorg replied. “But it’s good to remember where we came from. Makes the walking lighter.”

They walked on, boots thudding gently on the mossy trail as Blackreed grew closer.

The trail twisted along a ridge now, giving glimpses of the vast Brecklands rolling out to the west—patches of farmland, marsh, and distant smoke trails from tiny villages. The sky had cleared to a soft blue, and the wind whispered through the tall reeds at the path’s edge. Gorg and Gobol kept walking side by side, the others trailing just behind with Milda resting her weight on Yvanna’s shoulder.

“So what happened after Mirovend died?” Gobol asked, his curiosity sparked.

Gorg shifted his axe slightly and rubbed the back of his neck. “He died old, by all accounts, in his seventies. No blade touched him. Slipped away in his sleep, wrapped in wolfskin with the crown beside him. His oldest son, Boromir the Stern, took the throne. That’s when the first true split began.”

“Ah, so it starts,” Gobol muttered.

“Aye. Boromir ruled firm but cold,” Gorg said. “He taxed heavy, built fortresses, raised armies even in peace. His brother, Halgrim, ruled Windmere, and they never saw eye to eye. Halgrim said the throne was for the good of the land, not just the bloodline. Claimed the pact of Silverhall was being forgotten.”

“They fought?”

“Not openly. Not at first. But Halgrim refused tribute, minted his own coin, started calling himself Protector of the Hollow Marches. The court at Highfort called him a traitor, but the people loved him. It split the provinces in loyalty. That was the start of the Gray War. Twelve years of border skirmishes, field battles, and poisoned cups.”

“Who won?” Gobol asked.

“Neither,” Gorg said with a sigh. “Halgrim was assassinated at a feast—no one knows who did it. Boromir died a year later of a burst heart, and their sons signed the Treaty of Forkriver. Both lines kept their provinces. But that’s when the seven started to drift. Each heir wanted more power, more land.”

Gobol nodded. “Like goats on a hill, always shoving.”

Gorg smirked. “Exactly. Over the next hundred years, the seven provinces became ten. Then thirteen. And finally fifteen. Each new king or queen carved out a piece, sometimes by marriage, sometimes by conquest. But the Black Crown still passed down through Mirovend’s line, holding just enough force and tradition to be obeyed.”

“And what about Rugimund’s father?” Gobol asked. “Sigismund?”

Gorg’s eyes narrowed. “Now there’s a man of story. Sigismund the Just, they called him, though he could be hard as iron. He inherited a fractured realm, full of petty feuds and border raids. First thing he did was outlaw noble duels. Said if lords wanted blood, they’d settle it in court or with coin, not corpses.”

“Did that work?”

“For a while,” Gorg said. “But it earned him enemies. Some said he favored the lowborn too much—brought in land reforms, gave tax breaks to farmers, started building roads between provinces to trade better. It made the Brecklands rich, but it weakened some old houses. That’s when Beogul Stonewall rose up.”

“The Redbridge battle,” Gobol murmured.

“Aye,” Gorg said. “Sigismund was already ill. Rugimund rode at the front of the army. Twenty-one years old. First time in armor. They say he cut through Beogul’s vanguard like a hot blade through wax. When Beogul tried to retreat across Redbridge, Rugimund caught him and ended it with a single blow.”

Gobol whistled again. “And that’s our king now. Blackbeard.”

“Blackbeard,” Gorg echoed. “Wears it long and braids it with steel rings. Says he’ll only cut it when the provinces stand united again.”

Gobol chuckled. “Might grow down to his knees at this rate.”

“Maybe,” Gorg said with a grin. “But he’s got the blood for it. And sometimes, that’s what matters most.”

The wind picked up gently as they walked, carrying the faint smell of field blossoms and the damp memory of forest mist.

As the road curved toward the final stretch before Blackreed’s outer hills, the sun hung lower, casting long shadows across the path. The air was warm now, heavy with the scent of pine from the nearby woods. Gorg and Gobol continued their steady march, the rhythm of their boots tapping like a drum to the tune of old stories still unfolding.

“So,” Gobol said, breaking a short silence, “what about the other provinces? The ones that aren’t royal anymore. Any tales from them?”

“Oh, plenty,” Gorg replied. “The province of Thistlemarch, for example. Used to be ruled by House Darneth—sharp folk, famous for their horse breeders and poisoners. Legend has it the Lady Maerin Darneth killed her own husband to take the seat, then married his cousin to keep the bloodline unbroken. That line died out two generations later when a stable boy set fire to their keep over unpaid wages.”

Gobol snorted. “A stable boy ending a noble line. There’s justice.”

“And in Zar’s Hollow,” Gorg continued, “House Velgrad ruled for four hundred years. Built the great Library of Moonstone Vale. All the old treaties and blood pacts were stored there. They were so obsessed with lineage that they kept records going back to the Elven Accord. One of their lords tried to prove he had dragon’s blood—married an elf princess, sired children with slitted pupils.”

“Bet those kids were a joy at the tavern,” Gobol said dryly.

“They ruled until the library burned during the Succession Riots,” Gorg said. “The peasants rose when a ten-year drought hit and food was taxed beyond reason. Starved and angry, they stormed the archives, torched the records, and scattered the nobles.”

“What about Blackreed itself?” Gobol asked, glancing at the distant castle. “Seems a quiet enough place now.”

“Blackreed’s had its share,” Gorg said. “Once ruled by the House of Vairen—warriors all, hard-drinking and hard-dying. They held the castle through three civil wars. One of them, Lord Halven Vairen, was known as the Bear of Blackreed. Fought in full chainmail, even when drunk. Died in bed, surprisingly, at the age of eighty, after outliving five of his sons.”

“Sounds like a dwarf,” Gobol muttered.

“He’d have liked to hear that,” Gorg said with a grin. “His granddaughter tried to claim the throne of Highfort once, said she was closer in blood to Mirovend than the reigning king. It sparked the Claimant War. Only lasted a year, but it left Blackreed scarred and Vairen broken. They bent the knee in the end.”

“Any province still standing strong?” Gobol asked.

“Eldarreach,” Gorg said without hesitation. “Seat of the old High Temple. Ruled now by Queen Enira of House Rowandil. She’s a clever one—scholar, warrior, priestess all in one. Said to wield a blade called Spellwake, forged with runes that only answer to the bloodline. She’s loyal to Rugimund, though they say the two don’t trust each other.”

“Politics,” Gobol said.

“Always,” Gorg replied. “But history too. This land’s been shaped by sword, vow, and betrayal. Every king has bled, and every crown has cracks. But the people—like us—we’re the mortar. We keep it from falling apart.”

Gobol was quiet for a moment, then gave a slow nod. “Then we’d better keep walking.”

Gorg looked ahead. “Aye.”

The path wound between low stone markers now, ancient boundary stones mottled with lichen and old runes faded by centuries of wind and rain. Blackreed Castle loomed nearer with every step, its dark towers poking above the trees like silent watchmen. Gorg and Gobol walked in pace, the rhythm of their boots underscored by the steady clink of Gorg’s amulet against his armor.

“You ever hear of the Lost Crown War?” Gorg asked, eyes ahead, voice low as if the trees themselves might remember it.

Gobol shook his head. “Don’t think so. What happened?”

“Between the Third and Fourth Kings,” Gorg said. “After Mirovend’s grandson died without a direct heir, three claimants rose—two of them cousins, one a high priest from Eldarreach who said he’d had a vision naming him ruler. The crown itself—black steel, rimmed with duskstone—was taken from the Vault of Thrones and vanished in the night.”

Gobol raised an eyebrow. “Stolen?”

“Vanished,” Gorg repeated. “Some say stolen. Some say hidden. Some say it moved on its own. Point is, for ten years, no king wore the Black Crown. The provinces refused allegiance. Armies clashed at river crossings, border towns changed hands five times in a season. It was chaos.”

“And how did it end?”

“With a wedding,” Gorg said with a grin. “The cousins—Orimar and Daeldred—realized they were about to destroy the whole realm. So Orimar’s daughter married Daeldred’s son, and the high priest was thrown into a lake.”

Gobol snorted. “Diplomacy by marriage and drowning.”

“Aye,” Gorg chuckled. “The crown was returned soon after, mysteriously found in the crypts beneath Daggerhold, resting atop Mirovend’s sarcophagus. It hadn’t been there before.”

“You believe that?”

Gorg shrugged. “I believe someone wanted the war to end, and the symbol mattered more than the throne itself. The crown has always had a kind of weight beyond metal. Some say it carries Mirovend’s will. Others say it’s cursed.”

Gobol looked thoughtful. “Maybe both.”

Gorg nodded. “Then there was the Crimson Accord, some hundred and fifty years later. After three provinces tried to secede under a new banner. Said they were tired of Blackreed’s taxes and Highfort’s distant rule. So they raised their own banners, built walls, made treaties with the Dusk Elves of Myrenwood.”

“That sounds like a bad idea,” Gobol said.

“It was,” Gorg replied. “King Tharion II rode with fifteen thousand men, burned two of their cities, and took their lords hostage. He didn’t execute them. He made them walk barefoot behind his horse all the way back to Highfort. Every step, they had to recite the oath of loyalty. Took eleven days.”

Gobol laughed aloud. “Now that’s a lesson.”

“And still,” Gorg said, tone softening, “the land holds together. Not because of kindness or peace, but because the people believe the line of Mirovend still has the right to rule. Even if the kings aren’t perfect, the blood binds the realm.”

“Rugimund’s not perfect,” Gobol said. “But he’s battle-born. That counts for something.”

“It does,” Gorg agreed. “And he remembers the oaths. That’s rarer still.”

They passed a gnarled tree with old rope scars in its limbs—perhaps once used for hanging signs or worse. The past lingered in every stone and root in these lands, and the dwarves walked it with the weight of memory.

The shadows of Blackreed now stretched long before them as the sun began to dip toward the western hills. The castle walls rose solemnly above the fields, familiar and grim. The road had turned to packed earth and gravel, and the worn trail of countless feet was evident beneath the dust. Gorg and Gobol walked with a quiet weight in their steps, the air between them rich with the tales already shared.

Gobol broke the silence first. “You ever think what it would’ve been like to live back then? In Mirovend’s day?”

Gorg gave a low chuckle. “Every day. A sword in your hand, monsters in the hills, lords with grudges, and no safe place to sleep but under a roof you built yourself. Sounds like a bard’s song until you have to live it.”

“Still,” Gobol said, “they had purpose. Every war, every oath—they meant something. Not just coin or land.”

“They still do,” Gorg replied. “We just forget. Too much peace rots the roots of a kingdom.”

Gobol nodded, then after a moment, asked, “What do you think happens when Rugimund dies?”

Gorg didn’t answer right away. The question hung in the air like smoke.

“He has a daughter,” he finally said. “Lady Ceryne. Barely eighteen. Clever, they say. Studied at Eldarreach, trained with the sword and the law. But many won’t accept a queen. Not unless she proves herself in war or trial.”

“Then there’ll be claimants,” Gobol said.

“There always are,” Gorg muttered. “House Darneth still has an old branch. The Rowanlords in Eldarreach whisper of their blood claim. Even a few rogue priests from the Pale Order speak of a hidden heir born in exile.”

“And if one of them wins?”

“Then it starts again,” Gorg said. “A new Redbridge, a new Gray War. But I hope, for once, the next ruler is wise enough to keep the land whole.”

Gobol was silent for a time, then said, “You’ve got a good memory for names and bloodlines, Gorg. Ever think of writing it all down?”

Gorg smiled faintly. “I fight better than I write. Besides, stories are meant to be told. Around fires. On the road. To those who walk the same path.”

“Then keep telling ‘em,” Gobol said. “Because someone’s got to remember.”

The gates of Blackreed came into view ahead, the guards already watching their approach, the torches being lit atop the walls. Behind them, Milda walked slowly beside Yvanna and Folga, her strength returning with every step. Ahead, the castle waited—stone, history, and the living heart of a realm stitched together by blood, fire, and ancient names.

And as the last of the day’s light slipped behind the hills, the two dwarves walked into its shadow, their voices low, carrying the weight of kings.

The gates of Blackreed groaned open as the party approached, their boots heavy with the miles behind them. The guards nodded them through without question, eyes drifting briefly

over Milda, who now walked with steadier legs but still clung to Yvanna's arm. Inside the castle walls, the familiar smells of sweat, iron, and old stone greeted them like an old, unpleasant friend.

They made straight for the barracks. Inside, Elmond sat as usual, feet on the table, chewing on a hunk of bread this time, crumbs all down his beard. He looked up as the party entered and smirked.

"Well, I'll be. You lot made it back."

"We did," Gorg said, stepping forward. "Woman's safe. Five orcs less in the world."

Elmond rose, wiping his hands on his tunic. "Come, lass," he said to Milda. "We'll get you warm food and someone to take you back to Wraithfen."

Milda gave the party a grateful look, eyes shining with unshed tears. "Thank you. I'll remember your faces."

She followed Elmond out of the room briefly before he returned, jingling a small pouch.

"Twenty gold. Just as promised," he said, tossing it to Gorg, who caught it with a nod.

"Any more work?" Gobol asked.

Elmond shook his head. "Not today. Things are quiet. But you're welcome to use the training grounds, sharpen your steel, knock each other around. Or go drink at the Anvil."

Gorg made a face. "That ale tastes like horse piss. We'll find a better tavern with some real dark ale—something that doesn't taste like it's been strained through a goat's sock."

With nothing more to do in Blackreed, the four gathered their gear and set off again, leaving the stone walls behind. Their path led them northward toward Sootspire, a city set against the wide, still waters of Lake Mirra.

The first day was slow. Weariness hung heavy in their limbs after long nights without sleep. They made frequent stops, chewing on dried meat that stuck to their teeth and drinking from their waterskins. The land rolled gently, green and yellow with spring's breath, but it offered no shade nor wind.

Folga tugged at her cloak and muttered, "Twenty gold. Split four ways. Barely enough to patch a cloak, much less buy a new one."

"Better than nothing," Gorg said, biting into a strip of venison. "And we can hunt. Won't die of hunger."

Yvanna nodded. "Besides, we make a good team. You all handled yourselves out there."

Gobol grinned. "Aye. We fight well, travel well. Don't talk too much. That's worth sticking together for."

Folga smirked. “You mean, you don’t talk too much.”

He laughed. “Exactly.”

They walked into the evening with a new quiet between them—not the silence of strangers, but the peace of those who’ve bled together and found common ground.

As the sky turned to gold and the shadows stretched long, Yvanna began to sing. Her voice was clear, rising gently over the breeze:

“Oh the roads are long and winding,
Through the woods and over stone,
But the blade is light in company,
And the fire feels like home.
So I walk with those beside me,
Through the storm and silent night,
For no coin can match the comfort,
Of a friend who stands and fights.”

The others listened without speaking. The wind carried the last notes out across the hills, where they faded like embers into dusk.

Sootspire

Two days later, the weary road gave way to open sky and the glinting expanse of Lake Mirra. Its waters stretched calm and wide, the surface like silver glass under the afternoon sun. Trees bent low near the shore, their leaves shimmering in the breeze, and the distant outline of Sootspire rose hazy against the northern hills.

The party made camp beneath a cluster of willows close to the shoreline. A ring of stones quickly became a firepit, and soon flames flickered under a growing pile of driftwood. Folga, barefoot in the shallows with her sleeves rolled up, let out a triumphant shout and dragged a large fish from the water.

“Dinner!” she called, holding it up for the others to see.

“Well caught,” Gorg said, clapping his hands together. “I’ll gut it. You lot clean yourselves up before you scare the fish back into the lake.”

Soon, they stripped off armor and travel-stained clothes, wading into the cool, refreshing water. The lake soothed their tired limbs, washing away the grime and tension of the road. Yvanna floated on her back, eyes closed, humming softly, while Gobol dunked his head with a grunt and came up shaking like a dog.

“By the stone gods, this water’s colder than a dwarven aunt’s heart,” he muttered.

As the sun dipped lower, they returned to shore and dressed in drying clothes, their faces flushed with comfort. Yvanna took out her small wooden flute and played a lilting tune, light and airy, that wove through the camp like a wandering breeze. Gobol, sitting on a flat stone, methodically sharpened his sword, steel whispering against the whetstone.

A group of travelers passed along the nearby road—two carts pulled by mules, with burlap sacks tied high and children peeking out from beneath canvas. One of the drivers raised a hand and called out, “Evening to you, travelers!”

“Well met!” Gorg called back. “Safe roads to Wraithfen.”

“May your fire burn warm!” the driver replied, and the carts rolled on.

As twilight settled, another figure approached—tall, graceful, and hooded in a soft green cloak. An elf, slender and light-footed, carrying a fishing rod and a small canvas bag. He set up a modest tent not far from the party, then moved to the lakeshore and cast his line with practiced ease.

Gorg rose and strolled over. “Evening. Fine night for fish and fire.”

The elf turned and gave a polite nod. “Indeed it is. I’m Neathan, from Sootspire. I come here often. The fish near the rocks are heavier this time of year.”

“I’m Gorg,” the dwarf said, extending a hand. “You’re welcome by our fire, if you don’t mind sharing stories.”

Neathan smiled faintly. “I’d like that.”

Just as they turned to walk back, Neathan’s rod bent sharply. With calm movements, he reeled in another large fish, smooth-scaled and glistening. Gorg let out an approving grunt. “Looks like we’ll eat well.”

Later, the five of them sat around the fire, the two fish roasting on sticks over the flames. Neathan spoke softly as the others listened.

“I sell fish and vegetables in the Sootspire market,” he said. “Roots from the woods, berries in season, and wild greens. In summer, there’s plenty. But in winter...”

He paused, his gaze distant.

“I cut holes in the lake ice. Sit for hours. Sometimes I catch enough. Sometimes not. The market’s harsh—people want cheap food, even when it costs me days to gather it.”

Yvanna leaned forward. “Do you manage? Make enough coin?”

“Barely,” Neathan admitted. “I live in a small loft above the fishhouse. Pay my taxes late some seasons. But I love the work. The woods, the quiet. It’s... real.”

Folga nodded. “That counts for something.”

“It does,” Neathan said. “Enough to keep going.”

They sat in silence for a time, the fire popping and crackling, fish scent thick in the air, and the moon rising over the still waters of Lake Mirra.

Morning light shimmered on the surface of Lake Mirra as the party packed up their camp. They doused the fire, gathered their gear, and exchanged a final farewell with Neathan, who remained by the shore with his rod and soft smile. The road to Sootspire wound gently through fields and patches of forest, and by late morning, the tall silhouette of the lakeside city came into view.

Sootspire rose like a cluster of towers carved from pale stone, the oldest spires weathered and green-veined with age. Eight guards stood at the iron portcullis, halberds in hand, their armor finely polished but practical. One of them, a lean elf with stern eyes and a silver-embroidered tabard, stepped forward as the group approached.

“State your business in Sootspire,” he said, his tone measured.

“We seek rest,” Gorg replied, eyeing the walls. “A tavern, a hot meal, and maybe work, if there’s any to be had.”

The elf studied them a moment, then nodded. “Enter peacefully, and you’ll find no trouble.”

The gate groaned open, and the party stepped inside.

Sootspire’s streets, though once fine, had grown rough in their age. Built by the elves some six centuries past, the buildings leaned gently against one another, their foundations old and the cobbled roads worn smooth by generations of feet and wheels. Dust clung to the corners where the wind hadn’t swept. The scent of spices and sweat filled the air. Children ran barefoot, and merchants shouted over one another in the market square.

“Bit grimy for an elven city,” Gobol muttered, stepping around a puddle of dubious color.

“They’ve grown practical over the years,” Folga said, peering at a stall selling dried herbs. “Elegance fades when coin is short.”

They wandered the market for a time, watching the crowds barter and bicker, until the painted sign of a great antlered beast caught their eye—a wooden plaque that read: *The Mighty Deer*.

“Looks promising,” Gorg said, pushing the door open.

Inside, the air was warm and heavy with the scent of roasted meat and ale. The inn was dim but lively. A few elves, some humans, and a pair of dwarves hunched over cards in the corner. The barkeeper, a bald man with thick arms and a bushy moustache, nodded as they approached.

“Four strong darks and meals,” Gorg said, slapping a few silver down on the counter. “Hot pork, potatoes, and something green, if you've got it.”

The barkeep grinned. “Coming right up.”

They settled at a heavy wooden table near the hearth. Moments later, their tankards arrived—deep brown liquid sloshing to the brim. Gorg lifted his with both hands and slammed it back in one long go, letting out a loud croak as he finished.

“Grah! Now *that’s* a drink!” he growled, slamming the mug down with a thud.

Gobol followed suit, swallowing the dark ale like molten stone, foam collecting in his beard.

“Feels like it’s cleaning my throat with fire,” he said, exhaling hard.

Soon after, steaming plates arrived—thick slabs of pork, golden potatoes glistening with butter, and a small pile of green salad that none of them paid much attention to. They tore into the food like wolves. Gobol's beard was soon dotted with potato chunks and flecks of pork fat. Gorg grunted in satisfaction and waved for another round of ales.

Folga dabbed her mouth delicately with a cloth. “We’ll need more coin soon. This won’t last forever.”

“We could check the city board,” Yvanna said, spearing a piece of pork. “Sometimes there are bounty jobs or courier runs.”

“Or the market,” Gorg suggested. “Always need guards these days, what with the thieves and smugglers.”

Gobol spoke between bites. “Or the guilds. Fighters’ Guild, maybe? Mercenaries’ Hall? They might have proper work, not just errands.”

“We’ll look tomorrow,” Folga said. “For now, I want to eat and not think of orcs or coins.”

Gorg lifted his second mug. “To new cities, new work, and better ale!”

They clinked mugs and drank, the warmth of food and drink settling into their bones.

The Mighty Deer buzzed with the low hum of laughter and music as the night deepened. The party’s mugs were never empty, and their voices grew louder with each round. Plates had long been cleared, and only crumbs and the scent of spiced pork lingered. Gorg told a half-serious tale about wrestling a bear in his youth while Gobol tried to hum along to the bard’s lute in the corner.

It was then that a small figure hesitated near their table. A halfling woman, wrapped in a brown hooded cloak, clutching a satchel with both hands. She looked nervous, her eyes flicking to each of them before she gathered the courage to speak.

“Um... excuse me,” she said quietly, “but... you all look like folk who can handle... work.”

Gorg raised an eyebrow. “We’re listening.”

“My name’s Mingi,” she continued, voice trembling slightly. “I—uh—I loaned gold to a gambler. Man named Raston. Said he’d repay in a month. That was six months ago. Now he threatens me every time I ask for it back. I... I don’t have anyone else.”

“How much?” Yvanna asked.

“One hundred and fifty gold,” Mingi said. “I’ll give you twenty-five if you can get it from him.”

Gorg glanced at the others. Gobol thumped his chest. “Sounds like our kind of task.”

They stood, gathered their gear, and followed Mingi out into the night. The city had grown quiet, save for the distant dogs barking and the clatter of carts being pulled to late markets. The slums of Sootspire were a maze of leaning shacks and broken cobbles, the air thick with the scent of mold, smoke, and something fouler.

Mingi pointed to a squat stone house with a rusted iron door. “That’s it. He’s usually there at night.”

Gobol stepped forward and knocked, the sound echoing like a drum in the quiet street.

A moment later, the door swung open. A burly man with thick arms, a scar across his cheek, and eyes full of bad temper glared out. His voice was harsh.

“What the hell do you want?”

Gobol stood firm. “We’re here for the gold. One hundred fifty, owed to Mingi. Time to pay up.”

The man didn’t even answer. He thrust a boot straight into Gobol’s gut with brutal force. The dwarf flew backwards, slamming onto the street stones, air rushing from his lungs with a sickening wheeze.

“Gobol!” Yvanna shouted, already drawing her dagger.

Gorg charged with a roar, axe raised. The gambler grabbed a thick iron poker from beside the door and swung it hard, catching Gorg across the forehead. Blood streamed down the dwarf’s face, but he didn’t fall.

Folga began chanting a spell, but the gambler turned and swept her legs out from under her with a savage kick. She crashed to the ground with a cry, wind knocked from her chest.

Yvanna struck low, slicing at the man’s leg, drawing blood. Gorg swung his axe again, but the gambler ducked and pushed him back with a shoulder slam. Then, seeing himself surrounded and wounded, he bolted through the alley behind his house.

“He’s running!” Folga coughed, rising to her feet.

Gorg spat blood and charged after him. “After him!”

The party surged into the chase, boots pounding the filthy stones, leaping over crates and weaving through clotheslines. The gambler barreled down alleys, knocking over barrels and scattering trash in his wake. Shadows flicked past them as the slums came alive with shouts and whispers. The moon watched silently overhead as the hunt began in earnest.

The chase through the slums raged on, loud and chaotic. Raston darted through alleys like a rat in a maze, shoving crates, kicking down barrels, and vaulting fences with surprising agility. The party kept pace, boots thundering against the stones, weapons drawn, curses flying.

“Get back here, you weasel-livered cheat!” Gorg bellowed as he closed the distance once more.

Raston turned and swung wildly with a metal rod, clipping Yvanna’s shoulder. She hissed in pain but slashed back, grazing his ribs. He shoved her away and took off again.

“Gods damn it!” Gobol roared, panting as he tried to keep up. “How’s he still running?!”

The pursuit twisted through the city’s underbelly for half an hour—near-captures, clashes, shouts echoing down walls. Then, without warning, Raston threw open a rusted iron trapdoor hidden behind a pile of broken crates and leapt down into darkness.

“He’s gone underground!” Folga called. “After him!”

One by one, they descended into the sewers.

The air hit them like a wall—rank and putrid, heavy with rot and decay. The passage was narrow, the walls slick with filth, and the central trench of dark, waist-high water reeked of every imaginable foulness. Black rats scurried along the edges, their eyes gleaming like tiny embers.

“This is a damn pit,” Gorg growled, wading into the water.

“No turning back now,” Yvanna muttered, nose wrinkled.

They followed the path of splashing footsteps, moving fast through the winding tunnels, occasionally hearing the echo of Raston’s movements ahead. But then, just as they rounded a bend, a dozen glowing eyes appeared in the gloom.

Ten large rats leapt from the sides, hissing and baring yellow teeth.

“Here they come!” Folga shouted, casting a small flash spell that startled two back.

Gorg swung his axe in a low arc, cleaving through two at once, but another clamped onto his boot. Gobol grabbed a rat mid-leap and slammed it into the wall. Yvanna moved swiftly, stabbing low and precise with her dagger, slashing one clean across the spine.

Folga conjured a brief flare of fire into her palm, scorching three more as they tried to swarm. The last few were dispatched with stomps and steel, the water turning red with rat blood.

“I hate this place,” Gobol growled, shaking one off his shoulder.

They pressed on, dripping and smeared with sewer filth, until they came to a broad stone platform with a rotted wooden door.

Gorg shoved it open.

Inside, torchlight danced on stone walls. Tables were set up with dice, copper coins, and dirty dishes. A few mismatched chairs, ragged banners, and half-empty mugs gave the place the look of a hidden den. To one side stood a makeshift counter lined with cloudy glass bottles—some glowing faintly, others just suspicious.

At the back of the room, eight men in leather armor lounged around a long bench. Among them, now armed with a jagged dagger, sat Raston.

“Well, well,” one of the men said, rising. “Look what crawled out of the filth.”

Gorg stepped forward, blood still crusted on his forehead. He raised his axe and roared across the room, “Surrender, you scum of a maggot! Give back the coin you owe, or we’ll carve it from your hide!”

Raston stood, smirking. “I warned you, Mingi. I warned you I’d bury you in sewage if you brought trouble.”

The men laughed and began drawing their weapons—mostly daggers, some short clubs. The tension crackled like oil on fire.

“Last chance,” Gorg growled.

One of the thugs spat on the floor. “You’ll die like rats, same as your smell.”

And then, the room exploded into violence.

The room erupted into chaos the moment steel gleamed. Gorg charged forward with a thunderous roar, swinging his battle axe in a wide arc that cleaved through the first man’s chest and shoulder like a tree trunk. The thug barely had time to scream before he collapsed in two halves, blood soaking the dice-strewn table behind him.

Gobol, not a step behind, drove his short sword forward with both hands, the blade punching clean through another man’s throat. Blood sprayed in a fine arc, and the thug crumpled to the stone floor, gurgling as life slipped from him.

Yvanna, standing near the door, loosed an arrow in a blink, the shaft slicing through the air and slamming into the back of a man charging at Gorg. He screamed and spun, only to have Yvanna leap in, blades drawn, slashing his neck open with swift, surgical strikes. He fell clutching at nothing.

Two thugs surged at Gobol, catching him by surprise. One rammed into him with a shoulder, and the other kicked him in the side. Gobol was lifted off his feet and hurled into a table,

smashing it to splinters beneath his weight. Dishes and coins scattered across the floor, rolling into the dark corners.

Folga raised her hand to cast, but a thug darted in and drove his foot into her stomach, sending her sprawling backward into the shelves behind the makeshift bar. Bottles shattered around her, glass slicing her cloak and piercing the seams of her armor. She let out a sharp cry as her back hit the stone wall. Dazed and bleeding, she crawled forward, shards crunching under her palms, forcing herself upright.

Mingi tried to run, but one of the men caught her by the arm and struck her across the temple with the hilt of his dagger. She slumped to the ground without a sound, motionless.

“Filthy rats!” one thug shouted, swinging at Gorg with a club. The dwarf caught it on his shield and punched the attacker in the mouth with the pommel of his axe. Teeth flew.

Gobol roared back into the fray, blood running down his cheek, grabbing a stool and smashing it over a man’s head. The wood splintered, but the man kept coming until Gobol plunged his blade into the side of his gut and twisted.

Yvanna ducked under a wild swing and slashed low, severing a tendon in her foe’s leg. He collapsed screaming, and she finished him with a quick stab to the chest.

Folga, steady now and bleeding from her arms, whispered a short incantation. A searing arc of flame burst from her fingers, engulfing a thug in a column of fire. He ran screaming, his clothes aflame, and collapsed in smoke and ash.

The sounds of the fight were deafening—steel against steel, curses and screams, tables smashing, glass breaking. Raston stood at the back, eyes wild, backing toward a rear corridor as his men fell around him.

“Keep them off me!” he shouted, but fewer were left to obey.

Gorg stepped over a body, his face a mask of blood and fury. “Your time’s up, you dog-hearted bastard.”

The fight raged on, the room slick with blood and chaos, as the last defenders prepared to sell their lives dearly.

The last of the thugs fell to the floor with a wet thud, a dagger clattering from lifeless fingers. The den echoed with the sounds of heavy breathing, groans of the wounded, and the dripping of blood from broken tables and split flesh. Only Raston remained standing, backpedaling toward a dark corridor, blade trembling in his hand.

Gorg advanced, his boots splashing in puddles of gore and broken glass, battle axe raised and eyes blazing with fury.

“You should’ve paid your debt,” he growled.

Raston snarled and lunged with a wild thrust of his dagger, but Gorg sidestepped, caught his wrist, and drove his axe in a wide, final arc. The blade hissed through the air and took Raston's head clean from his shoulders. It spun once, twice, then rolled across the floor, eyes wide in frozen disbelief, coming to rest near the upturned bench.

Silence followed.

Yvanna exhaled slowly, wiping her blades on a fallen thug's cloak. Gobol grunted and wiped blood from his cheek. Folga staggered over to Mingi and checked her pulse, then gently lifted her to a sitting position.

The party searched the room, rifling through the pockets of the dead and overturning storage crates. In the back corner, behind a sagging tapestry, they found a small wooden chest. Inside gleamed stacks of coin—one hundred gold pieces, two hundred seventy silver, a few copper rings, and a small collection of worthless baubles.

"Well now," Gobol said, whistling low. "That'll lighten our step."

"Look at this," Gorg said, tugging the lid off a crate filled with cloudy glass bottles. "Moonshine. Likely strong enough to peel paint."

He uncorked one and took a long pull, drinking the entire bottle without pause. He lowered it, coughed once, then grinned.

"Burns like dragon's breath," he said. "I like it."

Gobol grabbed the crate. "We'll sell this at the market. Or drink it if coin runs dry."

Together, they helped Mingi to her feet. She groaned softly, but the color was returning to her face. "Is he… dead?" she asked, voice weak.

"Very," Yvanna replied. "Let's get you out of this sewer."

They climbed back up through the tunnel, Mingi leaning on Folga. Back in the open air, the night wind felt like a blessing. Sootspire's streets were quiet, lanterns glowing faintly through mist and chimney smoke. They returned to the Mighty Deer, still humming with low music and tired drinkers.

Mingi sat with them at the table again and laid down a small pouch of silver.

"Not the full sum I hoped for," she said, "but at least I've got something. Here's your twenty-five, as promised."

Gorg nodded and pocketed the coin. "You've got guts, Mingi. More than that rat ever had."

She smiled and waved to the barkeep. "A round for them. On me."

Tankards arrived, foaming and dark. They drank deeply, weariness and aches dulled by the warmth of ale and victory.

“If you ever need a place to sleep,” Mingi said, standing, “my door’s open. Top floor over the cobbler’s shop, east side of the market.”

She gave a small bow and left into the night, her footsteps light, her burden lessened.

The party drank quietly for a while, the fire crackling nearby. They spoke of nothing important—just words to keep the silence away—until the barkeep nodded toward the stairs.

“Room’s ready. Four beds. Clean sheets, mostly.”

They climbed up and dropped their gear. Without a word, they each collapsed onto the beds, the weight of blood, coin, and moonshine finally dragging them into sleep. The room faded into darkness, and peace settled in—for now.

Morning light crept into the tavern room, brushing over the tired faces of the four adventurers as they stirred awake. The smell of ash and ale lingered in the air, mixing with the dull ache of sore muscles and half-healed bruises. Gobol sat up first, rubbing his beard and groaning.

“I feel like a horse slept on my back,” he muttered.

Yvanna stretched her arms and yawned. “At least we’re not in a sewer.”

They gathered their gear, shouldered the crate of moonshine—now cleaned and sealed—and made their way to the market. The streets were already buzzing with morning life. Vendors shouted prices, children weaved through the stalls, and the scent of fresh bread mingled with roasted meats and fish.

They first tried the wine sellers, brewers, and fruit stands, offering the crate of moonshine.

“No license? No deal,” one elf said, waving them off.

“Illegal brew? I’m not risking my stall,” another muttered, pulling a tarp over her jugs.

After nearly a dozen rejections, Gorg grunted and said, “If they won’t buy it straight, we’ll sell it crooked.”

They set up near the edge of the market, beside a meat-seller’s stall where sausages sizzled over a grill. Gorg leaned casually against a barrel and began whispering to passersby, “Moonshine. Cheap. Ten silver.”

At first, no one stopped. An old elf sniffed and walked away. A dwarf glanced, then scowled.

But after a few more minutes, a younger elf in a hood stepped close and whispered, “How strong?”

“Strong enough to drop an ogre,” Gorg replied.

The elf handed over ten silver and slipped a bottle into his satchel. Word spread fast. Within the hour, they had a steady stream—elves, dwarves, even a few humans—slipping by,

exchanging coin for cloudy bottles of firewater. Gobol kept count, Yvanna managed the coin, and Folga handed out the bottles with a surprisingly cheerful smile.

Two hours later, the crate was empty.

“Well done,” Folga said, tucking the last coin into their shared pouch. “That’s seventy gold total now.”

“Let’s keep it together,” Yvanna said. “For food, gear, and whatever else comes.”

Gorg nodded. “Agreed. Shared work, shared coin.”

They made their way across the square to a newsstand pinned with parchment notices and handbills. Yvanna scanned the wall.

“Here,” she said, pointing to a neatly written notice. “Fighter’s Guild seeks skilled recruits. Room for training, small jobs, and contracts.”

Gobol grinned. “Sounds like our kind of place.”

They walked through winding streets lined with stone towers and ivy-draped archways until they reached a tall, square building with ironwood doors and banners bearing crossed swords. The Fighter’s Guild.

Inside, the main hall was quiet, echoing with distant clanging from the training yard. A tall, lean elf with silver hair and green eyes stood behind a desk. He looked up as they entered.

“Mithander,” he said by way of greeting. “Welcome. Looking for work?”

“We are,” Gorg said. “Name’s Gorg. This is Yvanna, Gobol, and Folga. We handle trouble.”

Mithander studied them a moment, then nodded. “Well, you look the part. But I’ll be honest—we’ve not much coin to offer now. Contracts are thin. However, I can offer training. Battle Master Nugur is free today. Learn from him, and maybe work will follow.”

“We’ll take it,” Gobol said without hesitation.

They followed Mithander through a corridor to the open training yard, where a broad-shouldered man with sun-darkened skin and a short beard stood with a practice sword in each hand.

“Nugur,” Mithander called, “fresh blood.”

Nugur turned, eyed them each with a soldier’s measure, then tossed one of the practice swords at Gorg.

“Line up. You want work? You’ll earn it with sweat.”

The training was brutal. Nugur didn’t go easy. He sparred them in pairs, taught them feints and counters, struck with precision, and barked instructions without pause.

“Don’t watch my blade—watch my hips!”

“Move your feet, or I’ll break your nose!”

“Spellcaster, you drop your guard too often—again!”

The day passed in a blur of exertion. They sweated through their gear, bruises bloomed like ink, and muscles screamed. But by sundown, they stood straighter, their movements sharper.

Nugur nodded at them as they wiped their faces.

“You’ve got grit,” he said. “Come back tomorrow. Maybe I’ll show you how to kill with a step and a whisper.”

Weeks passed in Sootspire under the hammer of Nugur’s relentless training. The party honed their skills day after day—sweat and bruises replacing the rust of idle time. Gorg and Gobol sparred with axes and swords until sparks flew. Yvanna learned to move between blades like a shadow, and Folga's spellwork grew tighter, faster, and more ruthless under pressure. Still, no work came. The guild hall remained quiet, the coin pouch untouched save for meals and ale.

Then one crisp morning, as the sun broke through a veil of soft clouds, Mithander entered the training yard, his long coat sweeping behind him.

“Work has come,” he said without ceremony. “A festival in Velcrest Vale. Wine harvest celebration, supposedly. But the whispers speak of tension between nobles—House Delmore and House Vantell. The Guild was asked to send neutral observers. You’re to attend, stay out of trouble if possible, and report any disturbance.”

“Wine and politics,” Gobol muttered. “Sounds like trouble already.”

They packed their gear and departed the next morning, traveling through rolling hills and golden vineyards. Velcrest Vale was a different world—ripe with color, music, and wealth. Wide roads lined with cherry trees, stone farmhouses with clay tile roofs, and rows upon rows of grapevines glistened in the sun. Banners fluttered in the breeze, and festival-goers sang as they moved between stalls and music stages.

But beneath the joy, tension simmered.

House Delmore, a family of proud vintners, held the festival. Their patriarch, Lord Albric Delmore, a tall, broad-shouldered man with graying temples and sharp eyes, greeted the party with formal courtesy. Yet the moment he laid eyes on Gorg, his expression soured.

“I’ve heard of you,” Albric said coldly, voice just loud enough for onlookers to hear. “Gorg of Bogwater. They say you once challenged a noble to a drinking contest and left him weeping in the mud.”

Gorg grinned. “He drank like a child and cried like one. I remember.”

Albric's jaw tightened. "Then let us see how you fare in a duel—not of wine, but of steel. Ceremonial, of course. Before the gods and the crowd. Unless your courage is only strong in the tavern."

Yvanna stepped forward, but Gorg raised a hand. "I'll accept. With pleasure."

The duel took place at midday in a ring of trimmed hedges and polished stone. Onlookers gathered—nobles, merchants, peasants—wine in hand. The sun gleamed on Gorg's chainmail and Albric's gilded plate, though it was clear Albric dressed more for show than for war.

The duel was short.

Gorg met the noble's first swing with a shield bash that knocked him off balance, followed by a clean sweep of his leg that dropped Albric to the ground. Before the lord could rise, Gorg had his axe at his throat.

The crowd gasped. Gorg stepped back, saluted with his axe, and left Albric to rise red-faced and humiliated.

Albric stood and brushed himself off with stiff dignity. "Well struck. You're clearly... practiced. Enjoy the festival."

Forced civility clung to his words like sweat to silk.

As the evening drew on and wine flowed freely, whispers began to drift through the vine-covered halls. Murmurs of Lady Mircella, Albric's elegant and cold-eyed wife, seen too often in the company of Lord Othric Vantell. Rumors of secret walks through the vineyards, of shared glances at court, of letters burned in haste.

Tension grew behind smiles, and the party stood watch as the seeds of scandal took root in the sunlit soil of Velcrest Vale.

The sun dipped low over Velcrest Vale, casting amber light across the vineyards and manor rooftops. Music drifted on the wind, and the scent of roasted meats filled the air, but tension hung thicker than the summer heat. The rumors of Lady Mircella's affair now churned through the festival like stirred wine, staining the air with intrigue.

Late in the afternoon, the party stood beneath an ivy-laced archway sipping watered wine when Lord Othric Vantell approached. Tall, with golden hair and the confident stride of a man too accustomed to noble privilege, he gestured for privacy and leaned in toward Gorg.

"You should know, master dwarf," he began, "that there is no affair. Mircella is as cold as a frostbitten wall. Whatever she and I share is the passing civility of highborn boredom."

Gorg narrowed his eyes. "Not what folk are saying."

Othric scoffed. "Folk say what they're paid to say. This is Albric's doing—he's become paranoid, spiteful, and now humiliated thanks to your little show in the dueling ring. He'd rather see me dragged through the vineyard dirt than admit he's lost control of his house."

“You talk fast for an innocent man,” Gobol muttered.

“I don’t need to lie,” Othric replied with a shrug. “But I’m not above enjoying Albric’s discomfort. Your duel has become quite the tale, Gorg. The vineyard girls are already calling you *the Winebreaker*.”

Gorg smirked. “Could be worse.”

That evening, at the grand diplomatic dinner beneath the lantern-hung pergola, the air turned sharp as broken glass. Nobles toasted and smiled through gritted teeth. But the growing storm broke when Lord Albric stood and addressed Othric across the table.

“Do enjoy the Delmore vintage, Othric,” he said, voice loud and deliberate. “I hear you’ve tasted everything else of mine.”

Silence followed. Othric stood, goblet still in hand.

“At least your wine’s stronger than your pride.”

The table shook as both men lunged. Plates flew, wine spilled, and gasps rang out as fists cracked against cheeks and chairs toppled.

“Enough!” Gorg roared, grabbing Albric around the chest and dragging him back.

Gobol pulled Othric by the collar, the noble kicking at a fallen plate.

“Are you children or lords?” Yvanna snapped, stepping between them.

“Get them out before they ruin the vale,” Folga muttered.

That night, with tensions still simmering, Yvanna and Folga slipped from the guest chambers. Disguised in servants’ robes, they made their way into Delmore Manor. While Folga watched the hall, Yvanna picked the lock to Lady Mircella’s study and moved quietly among shelves of old scrolls, perfume bottles, and ornate writing desks.

She found the hidden compartment beneath a false drawer. Inside were letters—finely penned, sealed with a dark, unfamiliar crest.

Back in their room, Yvanna spread them on the table.

“They’re not from Othric,” she said.

Folga traced the emblem. “This seal—it’s no noble house from Velcrest. Possibly someone from Zarothia... or further.”

“They’re love letters,” Yvanna whispered. “But with plans. Travel, meeting points, veiled mentions of ‘the replacement’ and something called the Hollow Oak.”

“The lady’s playing a deeper game than anyone thinks,” Folga murmured. “And it’s not just hearts at stake.”

The days following the diplomatic dinner were laced with tension. Whispers flooded the vineyards, nobles retreated into corners, and servants walked faster with lowered eyes. Despite the party's findings suggesting Othric's innocence, Lord Albric Delmore, his pride shredded and his temper unmoored, issued a formal, sanctioned challenge to Othric.

The duel was set at dawn in the estate's upper vineyard, surrounded by a ring of nobles and retainers. Gorg and Gobol stood silently among the observers, arms crossed, eyes sharp.

Othric arrived clad in polished dueling leather, calm and unflinching. Albric, clad in red and black, looked thinner, worn by sleepless nights and whispered doubts. His eyes were bloodshot, his jaw tight with rage.

The duel began with a flash of steel.

Both men fought viciously, not with the elegance of noble sport but the savagery of men with real hatred. Albric struck with desperate ferocity, while Othric parried with calm, almost mocking precision.

Then it ended—brutally.

A lunge, a twist, and Othric's blade slid clean through Albric's chest. The older lord staggered, gasped, and collapsed, blood soaking the vineyard soil. A hush fell over the gathered crowd as Lady Mircella, dressed in white mourning garb, watched without a tear.

Within three days, bells rang from the chapel tower—Othric and Mircella wed in a quiet, private ceremony.

The Delmore family erupted in fury. Albric's brother, Lord Renric, denounced the marriage as a political sham, a hasty cover-up for murder disguised in noble form.

"This was no justice!" Renric declared to the crowd outside the manor. "It was an orchestration. My brother was driven mad—and Othric fed the madness!"

Suspicion clung to the newlyweds like wine to a goblet.

While the wine festival limped forward under a shroud of grief and scandal, Gobol wandered the manor grounds, uneasy. He spoke with servants, stable hands, and an old scribe in the Delmore library. One rainy afternoon, he returned to the party with a battered envelope and a grim expression.

"These letters," he said, placing them on the table, "were never written by the same hand. I found this with the house clerk—an earlier letter from Mircella to her aunt. Same signature, different style."

Folga leaned over the ink-stained parchment. "The ones we found in the secret drawer... someone forged them."

“And Othric was the one who benefited from every false word,” Gobol said. “He faked the affair—drove Albric into obsession, then let the fool die by blade. And now he sits with a ring on his finger and the Delmore vineyards in his pocket.”

Yvanna folded her arms. “This was no scandal of love. It was a planned takeover.”

“Then the question is,” Gorg said, voice low, “do we let it stand?”

The tensions in Velcrest Vale finally spilled from whispered scandal into open sabotage.

One week after the wedding, flames lit the night sky as a Vantell wine warehouse went up in smoke. Two nights later, barrels of moonwine—the rare, aged vintage worth thousands—were found smashed and leaking into the cobbled cellar floor of the Vantell estate. The air reeked of ruined sweetness and vengeance.

Lord Othric, furious and flushed with frustration, turned to the Fighter’s Guild. A courier arrived in Sootspire, bearing coin and a sealed summons. Within a day, the party returned to the Vale.

“You’re to investigate the break-ins,” said the Vantell steward as he led them through the wrecked cellar. “No one trusts local guards. Too many old loyalties.”

The damage was considerable. Dozens of broken barrels, locks forced with unnatural precision, and scorch marks along the stone walls.

Gorg knelt by a cracked cask. “Whoever did this knew exactly what they were after. These were aged reserves.”

Yvanna traced a finger over strange markings near the barrel rack. “Look here. These aren’t just scrapes.”

Carved into the wood, near the breaks, were small symbols—circles bisected by jagged lines, etched carefully.

Folga leaned in, her brow furrowed. “Alchemical signs. This one—volatile release. That one—degradation.”

“Magic-assisted sabotage?” Gobol asked, frowning.

“No doubt,” Folga said. “Someone planned this with care.”

Over the following days, Yvanna and Folga worked through clues gathered from the winery, questioning barrel makers, interviewing cellar workers, and even tailing suspicious figures through the markets at night.

Their trail led to a small alchemist’s hut just outside the Vale, where they found a ledger listing recent customers. One entry stood out: a bulk order of vine rot accelerant, paid for in Delmore coin, signed only with the initials “S.D.”

Later that evening, under cover of darkness, they followed a cloaked figure into the old Delmore stablehouse, now largely abandoned. Inside, they found five saboteurs gathered around a crate of alchemical vials, whispering plans for another strike.

At the center stood Ser Daman Delmore—Albric's younger brother. His sharp eyes and bitter mouth twisted with determination.

"We bleed them," he said, "one barrel at a time. Let Othric taste the same rot he fed my brother."

Folga's breath caught, and Yvanna pulled her quietly back. They left without drawing attention.

Back at the inn, the party gathered around the fire, grim.

"It's not just revenge," Folga said. "Daman's building something darker."

"Moonwine wasn't just targeted to hurt their purse," Yvanna added. "It's symbolic. Legacy. Prestige."

"And Daman wants it all burned," Gorg muttered.

Gobol cracked his knuckles. "So. What do we do about it?"

Long before the vineyards of Velcrest Vale bore their first harvest, the lands belonged to a different time—one ruled by feuds, oaths, and lineage rather than coin. The bloodlines of House Vantell and House Delmore stretch back nearly four centuries, rooted in the fertile heartland of Zarothia and the southern reaches of Breckland. Once kin, then rivals, then bound by uneasy treaties, the two houses shared not only land but scars.

The story began with Lord Elarion Vantell, a proud and ambitious noble who ruled the coastal vineyards in the Age of Inheritance, a period when noble titles passed often not by blood but by written accord, sealed under royal law. Elarion had three daughters and no sons. His lands were vast—stretching from the Mirra Lake edge through the southern hills of Velcrest—and the Vantell name carried weight in both court and countryside.

But power breeds division.

Elarion's youngest daughter, Lenira, married into the rising House Delmore. Her husband, Rodric Delmore, was a minor knight with a keen tongue and a well-placed alliance. As Elarion's health declined, he rewrote his will, naming Lenira and Rodric's firstborn as the heir to Velcrest, bypassing his other daughters.

When Elarion died, the will was contested. His eldest daughter, Syral, claimed the document was forged. A ten-year feud followed, known in old records as the War of Bitter Roots. No open battles were fought, but vineyard fires, poisoned wells, and midnight ambushes bled both houses dry.

Eventually, the crown intervened. A compromise was struck: Velcrest would be split. House Vantell would retain the northern ridgelands and the lake holdings, while House Delmore took the southern vineyards and wine halls. The division planted seeds of quiet resentment that lasted generations.

Two hundred years later, in the reign of King Tharion II, both houses attempted reconciliation through marriage. Lady Mircella Vantell, descended directly from Lenira's bloodline, was wed to Lord Albric Delmore. The ceremony was lavish, the vows bound with ancient symbols of unity, the banners of both houses flown together over the high tower of Velcrest.

But the marriage was strategic—deliberate, political, and cold. A patch over an old wound.

Mircella, though raised as a Delmore by title, was Vantell in blood and bone. Her kinship to Othric—her cousin by her father's younger brother—was long known to heralds but buried beneath the convenient veil of marriage law. It was Othric, not Albric, who bore the same fire as the old Vantells, and when Mircella and Othric rekindled their connection, it awakened not just desire—but legacy.

The ancient blood pact between Vantell cousins, penned and sealed during the era of Elarion's reign, had a stipulation long forgotten: if two Vantells of the primary line wed, and one held a claim to the lands of Velcrest, they would be entitled to full restoration of the disputed territory—revoking the Delmore stake entirely.

That pact had lain dormant in a scroll chamber in the Mirran Cathedral Archive, unseen for centuries.

Until Mircella and Othric found it.

The rediscovery of the ancient blood pact—yellowed parchment bound with fading wax and the seal of King Arvenor the Measured—shifted the balance of power like a tectonic plate beneath the vineyards of Velcrest.

Othric and Mircella, once cousins by blood and now bound by shared ambition, recognized the clause for what it was: an ancestral key to unlock the full legacy of House Vantell. While the Delmores held the southern vineyards and the ancestral manors, the pact made clear that should two of direct Vantell descent unite in marriage, the lands lost during the Inheritance Dispute were to revert to the Vantell bloodline.

It was more than politics. To Mircella, it was justice—vengeance for generations of perceived betrayal and diluted heritage. Raised within the stern corridors of House Delmore, she had never felt at home. Her mother, a Vantell by birth, died young, and her father, Albric's uncle, married her off with the same detachment one might sell a field.

Othric, meanwhile, had long resented the territorial compromise made by his great-grandfather. As a child, he was told the southern lands once belonged to his ancestors and were only lost due to the weakness of the crown's arbitration. The discovery of the pact gave

him the legal leverage to challenge the very structure of land ownership that had shaped Velcrest for three hundred years.

But the pact alone was not enough.

Public opinion, noble tradition, and the complexity of local law made open reclamation impossible without both justification and momentum. That's when the strategy began—an invisible war of reputation and pressure.

It started with subtle gestures. Othric increased his presence at court and at festivals, projecting strength and charm. Mircella, ever calculated, began to isolate Albric socially. She subtly discredited him at formal dinners, questioned his decisions in private council, and sowed doubt about his mental state. Servants were replaced with Vantell loyalists. Stewardship shifted from Delmore retainers to neutral bureaucrats under the guise of "efficiency."

Othric forged letters—not to humiliate, but to push Albric into paranoia. He mimicked handwriting, used wax sigils stolen from discarded correspondence, and crafted notes that hinted at betrayal, at love rekindled between Mircella and another, at hidden plots. These letters were "discovered" in Mircella's chamber and other parts of the manor. Albric, already strained by years of political friction and growing isolation, took the bait.

His erratic behavior soon followed. He called late councils, issued contradictory orders, even accused servants of spying. When the duel was finally called, Othric played his role flawlessly—reluctant but honorable. He knew the outcome long before steel was drawn.

And when the blade found its mark and Albric fell, the last major obstacle vanished.

Three days later, as storm clouds loomed over the vineyards, Othric and Mircella were wed in a quiet ceremony under the Vantell crest. A union not of love, but legacy.

The union of Othric and Mircella Vantell, cloaked in the respectability of noble marriage, marked the turning point in Velcrest Vale's history. Though subdued in ceremony, its consequences echoed louder than any proclamation. The newlyweds invoked the ancient blood pact within days, presenting it before the Vale's court archivist and a council of heralds convened from both Breckland and Zarothia. The pact, though ancient and obscure, bore the royal seal and language unmistakably binding in the old law.

There was outrage, naturally. The surviving Delmore line, led by Ser Daman Delmore, argued the document had no legal standing in the current realm, having never been reaffirmed by any modern king. But the Vantells were prepared. They had unearthed, alongside the pact, a chain of correspondences between Elarion's era and the royal archivist of King Arvenor, who had explicitly acknowledged the blood right "should heirs of equal descent bind themselves through sanctioned union."

Faced with documented proof and the presence of royal backing, the heralds had no legal ground to dismiss the claim. The Vantells gained rights not only to the disputed vineyards,

but to titles that had once been split—namely, the Lordship of Mirra's Southern Crest, and the exclusive trade rights tied to the moonwine harvest.

Mircella wasted no time.

With a steady hand, she restructured the governance of the Vale, removing Delmore loyalists from key posts and installing Vantell stewards. The Delmore family, fractured by grief and scandal, retreated into quiet rebellion. Ser Daman, now viewed by many as the symbolic head of the old Delmore legacy, refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the marriage or the land transfer.

From the shadows, he gathered allies—lesser nobles, landowners, and merchants who had prospered under Delmore rule. To them, the Vantell claim was not restoration but conquest. He began organizing resistance not with swords, but with sabotage, disruption, and quiet alliances with disaffected Breckland traders who felt Vantell tariffs were too steep.

Even outside the Vale, lords of Zarothia took notice. The Vantell maneuver, though legal, had revived a dangerous precedent: that old bloodlines, if cleverly exploited, could overturn centuries of property and power. It created a wave of concern that echoed in courts far beyond the wine-soaked hills.

But Othric and Mircella remained unmoved. The Vale was now Vantell. They patrolled it with velvet gloves, but iron fingers beneath. Publicly, they offered peace. Privately, they prepared for reprisals.

And so Velcrest Vale entered a new chapter—not of growth, but of subtle war. Vineyards ripened under clouded skies, and what began as a marriage between cousins now threatened to redraw the lines of power throughout the region.

The air in Velcrest Vale thickened with tension as the growing divide between the Delmore loyalists and the ruling Vantells edged toward bloodshed. Realizing that another outbreak would plunge the region into open conflict, the party acted swiftly, calling for a moot at the Temple of Erathis—a sacred place known for its impartiality and ancient role as arbiter in disputes of law and legacy.

The temple, nestled among sun-bleached stones and olive trees, welcomed both sides under a vaulted dome etched with runes of order and judgment. Nobles, retainers, and common folk filled the pews, whispering under the glow of amber braziers. High Priest Talandra, draped in silver robes, presided from the central dais, her voice calm and firm as she welcomed all to speak without violence under Erathis's gaze.

The party stood at the heart of the chamber, facing both Mircella and Othric on one side, and Ser Daman Delmore flanked by his supporters on the other. Tension buzzed like a stormcloud.

Gorg stepped forward, his voice resonating against the stone walls. "We've bled in your vineyards. We've watched kin strike kin over names and soil. But none of this," he said,

turning to both houses, “is worthy of legacy if it’s built on lies and vengeance. Honor doesn’t come from inheritance—it comes from how you wield power once you have it.”

Gobol followed, slamming a scroll onto the altar table. “This is Othric’s forgery. Letters meant to break Albric’s mind, twist his thoughts, and drive him to a duel he was never meant to win. We found the ink, the seals, the confessions of those who helped plant them.”

Gasps rippled through the crowd. Mircella’s face was unreadable, but her knuckles whitened.

Then Folga stepped forward, unfurling another parchment. “But this,” she said, voice steady, “is real. The original Vantell blood pact. The heirloom contract signed by Elarion Vantell and sealed by King Arvenor. Mircella’s claim is valid. No trick. No deceit. She is heir to the vineyard.”

The room stirred—half in anger, half in awe.

Finally, Yvanna spoke, clear and unwavering. “We propose this: House Delmore ceases all sabotage and retaliation. In exchange, they receive a formal share in the Vantell winery—a minority stake, protected by the temple’s charter, ensuring employment and legacy for the Delmore line.”

Murmurs turned into low voices. Ser Daman stood, jaw tight. “A share? You ask us to bow to the people who stole our land?”

“You lost it long before Othric,” Yvanna said calmly. “This is your best path forward.”

The room held its breath.

Suddenly, one of Daman’s advisors, a dark-robed magus, raised his hand and uttered a word of power. Green light flared, and a shimmering bolt of force erupted toward the dais. Othric’s hand flew to his blade.

But before any blow landed, High Priest Talandra raised her staff and slammed it down. A shockwave of silvery light burst through the temple, halting spells, freezing limbs mid-motion.

“Enough!” she thundered. “This place is sacred. One more act of violence, and your houses will be cast from temple law. Erathis watches.”

Silence.

The energy faded. Slowly, weapons were lowered. The magus bowed his head in shame and was led away.

Talandra turned to both houses. “You have heard the truths. You have seen the evidence. Accept the pact, or face judgment not just of men—but of the gods who gave you this land.”

The room remained silent, heavy with decision.

The following morning, the temple bells rang solemnly across Velcrest Vale, their tones not of celebration, but of judgment. Beneath the dome of Erathis, a tribunal was formed—three neutral judges from Breckland, Zarothia, and the temple itself. Both houses sat in silence, expressions taut as strings. The party stood nearby, observers now, yet their presence still cast long shadows over the proceedings.

High Priest Talandra stepped forward with scroll in hand. Her voice echoed through the hall.

“After review of testimony, evidence, and the divine rites of truth, this tribunal finds Lord Othric Vantell guilty of willful deception, falsification of courtly correspondence, and manipulation leading to the unlawful death of Lord Albric Delmore.”

Gasps moved like wind through the assembly. Othric stood, face pale and impassive.

“By decree of temple and heraldic law, you are stripped of noble status, lands, and title. You are to be exiled beyond the northern border of Zarothia. Should you return without sanction, you forfeit your life.”

Mircella remained seated, eyes closed, hands folded in her lap.

“As for Lady Mircella Vantell,” Talandra continued, “the tribunal recognizes your rightful claim under the Vantell blood pact. You will retain your family name and a ceremonial share in the Vantell winery. However, you are to renounce all political ambitions and titles beyond that of trade representative. You may no longer sit in council or exert claim on hereditary governance.”

Mircella opened her eyes and nodded once, the slightest crack in her noble mask.

Ser Daman stood next, teeth clenched, ready for the blow.

“For conspiring against a lawful household, engaging in sabotage, and harboring violent resistance, you, Ser Daman Delmore, are to be placed under house arrest at the Delmore estate. You will retain your honorific, but may not lead retainers or bear arms without temple oversight.”

A murmur of approval and discontent mingled.

“To preserve peace, a steward from the Temple of Erathis shall henceforth reside in Velcrest Vale and oversee the terms of the Wine Treaty. All profits from the winery are to be split by decree: seventy percent to the Vantell line, thirty percent to the Delmore house, with no right of monopoly or militarization.”

The decision left the hall in stunned quiet.

As the tribunal dismissed, guards escorted Othric out of the chamber. He did not resist. He only paused once, passing Gorg.

“I hope your truth serves you better than mine did,” he said bitterly, then vanished into exile.

Mircella, for all her poise, walked slowly from the chamber, the weight of history now a crown of thorns upon her brow.

Ser Daman was led out in chains of silver, head high, defiance simmering in his gaze.

And as the wine harvest resumed in Velcrest, and the banners of both houses were raised in cautious accord, the scent of old grudges remained.

Though law had spoken, in the shadows of the Vale, vengeance still brewed—waiting, watching, and ever patient.

The party returned to the Fighter's Guild in Sootspire under a sky smeared with twilight, each step lighter now that justice—if uneasy—had been served. In the guild hall, Mithander awaited, his expression solemn yet edged with relief. He counted out hefty gold coins, placing them on the table.

"Two hundred fifty gold, for your service to balance the peace of the Vale," he said, sliding the pouch across. "You've earned it."

Gorg caught the pouch, scoffing with a grin. "This city is worse than a theater of maggots," he laughed, voice rolling against the stone walls.

Mithander chuckled softly. "Perhaps. But Sootspire has its own stories to inspire—or terrify." He leaned back. "If you've time, you deserve its history. It explains much of our present—and suggests the paths ahead."

"Six hundred years past," Mithander began, "long before your Great Kingdom stretched across Breckland and Zarothia, Sootspire was born in desperation.

Wood-chopped settlers pressed into the Thickwood Forest's edge, fleeing famine south of the Grayplate Mountains. Their makeshift town rose around the natural hot-springs in the valley—steam drifting into the air, sulfur-stained stones willowing under moss. They named it *Sootspire* for the blackened smoke the springs covered the peaks in, and the primal forge it gave them: boiling water to light, cook, cleanse—and even power crude turbines.

Over the first century, a simple communal council governed the city—no nobles, just elected wardens. They traded timber, furs, fresh spring water, and rare mineral salts with the Breckland kingdoms and Zarothian border towns. They were practical folk, shaped by their land, and fiercely independent."

"But as the second century dawned," Mithander continued, "Sootspire drew the eyes of older powers—particularly the elven clans of the Silvergrove and Deepwyrd, who had long held dominion over the forested valleys and ridgelands where Sootspire now stood. The elves, especially the Silvergrove line, viewed the settlement as an encroachment, a violation of sacred treaty stones laid long before human boots ever touched these soils.

A period of veiled conflict began—raids, poisoned wells, the theft of spring-water urns consecrated by the elven moonwardens. The settlers called it 'The Whisper War,' for no

battle was ever declared, and no elf ever admitted to striking first. And yet people vanished. Groves were found burned or carved with blood-marked glyphs. Human scouts returned with tales of vines that moved like snakes and arrows that found them through fog.

Eventually, a treaty was brokered by an elven emissary known as Vaeleneth, daughter of the Twilight Court, and a human chieftain called Brandus Coalborn. They met beneath the root-pillars of the Caelmire Tree—since felled—and agreed on a boundary: humans would keep the hot springs and hills, but the inner forests would remain elven. In return, the elves would gain seats in Sootspire's council and rights to sell rare herbal goods and enchanted crafts within the city.

For a time, peace held.

But time wore the treaty thin. As human populations grew and elven numbers waned, tensions rose anew. The elves—long-lived, slow to change—resented the quick expansion of industry. Sootspire had by now become a hub of steaming forges and copper guilds, its streets choked with mineral traders and salt smugglers. Humans demanded more land, more trade routes, more influence.

By the fourth century, the elven seat in the city's council had become more symbolic than sovereign. The Deepwyrd clan withdrew, retreating to the north, while the Silvergrove remained, bitter and watchful. To this day, remnants of those tensions flicker in the alleys and shopfronts of the city, where elven traders still haggle in hushed tones and their elders speak of Sootspire as a lost daughter of the forest—beautiful, wild, and corrupted by ash."

Mithander paused, his eyes reflecting the amber lamplight.

Mithander's voice deepened as he leaned forward, resting his elbow on the guildhall table.

"By the end of the fourth century, the growing might of Sootspire could no longer be ignored—not by kings, nor by the remaining elven elders who clung to memory more than power. What had begun as a refuge had become a keystone city, positioned at the trade-cross between the Mirra lakeside routes and the mineral-rich northern hills. But growth bred division, and it was within Sootspire's own walls that its third great conflict arose—the Schism of the Eight Forges.

At the heart of Sootspire's economy were its forge-guilds, known collectively as the Eight Rings. Initially formed to regulate the city's smithing, brewing, enchanting, and stonework, these guilds grew powerful—each seated in different quarters of the city and protected by traditions older than most nobles could recall. By the time the fifth ring was founded, it wasn't just metal they shaped—it was politics, coin, and fate.

Arguments between the guilds over tariffs, access to the central spring vaults, and distribution rights turned to sabotage. Inferior tools appeared on market stands. Enchanted locks failed mysteriously. Then came the night of Sootshine Fire—a calculated act of destruction. The sixth ring's forgehall was engulfed in green flame, lit by alchemical oil that left residue found in the seventh ring's storage warehouse.

The city nearly tore itself apart.

For three years, Sootspire functioned without a central council, its streets ruled by hired guards, guild militias, and clandestine alliances. Elves withdrew entirely from the ruling process, claiming neutrality, though some whispered they funded the chaos to divide their rivals. The city's once proud unity fractured along street lines, and for a brief time, no fire was lit in the public forges—considered cursed by the spirits of betrayed guildmasters.

It was not until the rise of a new guild—one not dedicated to trade but to arbitration—that peace returned. The Gray Accord was forged in the Temple of Erathis by representatives of the remaining six forge guilds, three human elders, and a single Silvergrove matron who broke her clan's silence. A new ruling charter was formed, limiting guild power and instituting what Sootspire now knows as the Circle of Thirty—thirty elected stewards representing trade, race, temple, and magic, led not by a monarch, but by vote."

Mithander gave a short breath and added, "And from that moment, Sootspire was no longer just a city—it was an idea. A balance of fire and law, ash and vision."

Mithander tapped the edge of his mug as he continued, his voice softer now, as if remembering echoes rather than recounting facts.

"Of course, balance never lasts forever. With the establishment of the Circle of Thirty, Sootspire entered what historians now call the Age of Steam and Salt. Trade flourished like never before. The hot springs were channeled into public baths, healing halls, and even early steamworks that powered mills and street-lamps. Salt bricks—once a luxury—became common currency, used to preserve goods, pay wages, and settle debts. Sootspire minted its own coinage, the flame-marked scald, backed by silver from northern mines and salt from the brine pits.

But prosperity brought new predators.

The rise of the Moonward Mercantile Pact—a cabal of wealthy trade houses based in Zarothia—threatened Sootspire's autonomy. These houses, flush with foreign coin and armed with contracts enforced by private armies, began buying up salt pits, wine rights, and warehouse space within the city. Slowly, the guilds lost ground. Elven traders found themselves edged out of key routes, and dwarven smiths, once proud of their independence, found their ore shipments delayed unless they 'aligned their contracts' with the Pact.

The Circle resisted, but not all its members were incorruptible. A third of the stewards quietly sold their votes. The Pact nearly took the city in ink and ledgers where they had failed in battle.

It was the intervention of an unlikely group—the Pale Arcanum, a reclusive order of mages exiled from Eldarreach—that saved Sootspire from becoming another client city. They revealed the extent of the Pact's dealings, using divination and clandestine messages passed through flame-runes and inkbound familiars. Their exposure of the 'Ledger War,' as it was

later called, led to the expulsion of eleven merchants, the arrest of five stewards, and a renewed alliance between the Arcanum and the Circle.

Since then," Mithander said, spreading his hands, "Sootspire has walked a narrow path. It is richer than ever, yet constantly under pressure—from the remains of elven resentment, the memory of guild feuds, and the quiet fingers of foreign interests that still scrape beneath its foundations. It remains a free city, but freedom here is fought for in every generation."

He sat back, looking at the party with a glint in his eye.

"And now it is your generation's turn. Strange how history never stops unfolding."

Mithander shifted his weight, stretching his fingers as though peeling back layers of time with each motion.

"Sootspire, for all its turmoil, became a haven for those who did not belong elsewhere. Refugees from the Breckland Floods of 517 found shelter in its southern quarters, building what we now call the Tumbledown Rows. Dwarves cast out from the under-halls of Kraghelm made new lives as steamsmiths here, creating devices of remarkable ingenuity—grinders, gearlooms, even whisper-cores for magical communication. Half-elves, scorned in their birthlands, found community in the blended alleys between the river wards and old elven enclaves. It is said that no two streets in Sootspire are truly alike—and that's because no two lives within them are.

But even this patchwork city of compromise could not escape the great wars that swept the region.

During the Iron Pact Rebellion, when nobles from western Zarothia attempted to shatter the monarchy and install a merchant-run republic, Sootspire was drawn into the storm. Though neutral by charter, many of its trade roads and vaults became strategic targets. Saboteurs from both sides skulked through the steam channels and river tunnels. Twice, the Circle of Thirty was nearly dissolved when assassins struck during council votes.

In response, Sootspire created one of its most unique institutions: the Hearthguard. Not a traditional military force, but a rotating body of volunteers, mercenaries, arcane scouts, and former thieves—tasked with defending the city from threats both internal and foreign. Its oaths were taken in the Hall of Coals, not a temple, and its loyalty was sworn to the city itself, not any banner or crown.

You see," Mithander said, raising his voice slightly, "that's the root of it. Sootspire doesn't thrive because it's strong or clever or ruthless. It thrives because it chooses itself. Again and again. In every age. Whether against elven fury, guild wars, or coin-driven invasions—it remains Sootspire. And that makes it more than just a city."

He looked toward the window, where smoke rose in lazy tendrils over the rooftops.

"It makes it a promise."

Mithander paused, letting the weight of his words settle like ash over embers. Then he continued, more softly now, as if the final threads of Sootspire's tale were more sacred than spoken.

"In recent decades, that promise has been tested in subtler ways. Not with blades or flame, but with silence—apathy, weariness, and the slow fraying of civic trust. After the great conflicts, Sootspire entered what some call the Quiet Drift. The Circle of Thirty grew older, more rigid. The Hearthguard dwindled in strength, and many of its veterans faded into the alleys or took coin elsewhere. The guilds, while still powerful, lost their fire of purpose, their crafts dulled by routine and market pressure. Even the Silvergrove elves—those who once watched this city with scorn or pride—grew weary, their elders retreating into seclusion, their younger folk forgetting the pacts that once burned so bright.

And yet…"

He looked over the party—scarred, travelworn, but keen-eyed and alert.

"There are signs of life again. Outsiders coming together, not out of convenience but conviction. Fighters who choose truth over coin. Mages who still dare to chase lost lore. Thieves who use their shadows not to hoard—but to expose rot. You see, this city breathes through its people. Through those who walk the cracked stones of the Tumbledown Rows, through the brewers near the Red Brine Cauldron, and yes, through you as well."

He reached for a bottle, uncorked it with a twist, and poured five cups from a dusty cask marked with a faded hearth symbol.

"A toast," he said, lifting his. "To Sootspire—not the city it is, or was, but the city it might yet become."

Gorg raised his cup and grunted. "Maggots or no, this city's got teeth."

Folga smiled faintly. "And maybe even a bit of heart."

Yvanna clinked hers against the others. "Just so long as it doesn't bite us first."

Gobol downed his in one gulp, wiped his beard, and said, "Whatever's next, it'll find us ready."

And as the fire cracked in the guildhall hearth, the history of Sootspire turned another page—its newest chapter not yet written, but already stirring in the minds of those who dared to carve it.

The Mighty Deer tavern buzzed with the muted tones of nightly custom—clinking mugs, murmured gossip, and the low hum of a traveling bard's lute in the corner. Smoke curled lazily from the hearth, casting a soft glow over the rough timber walls and warped floorboards. The party had claimed their usual corner table beneath the mounted boar's head, its glassy eyes forever watching the laughter and sorrows spilled nightly in its shadow.

Gorg and Gobol sat side by side, mugs in hand, tilting back their fourth round of dark ale like drought-starved bulls. The drink soaked their beards and dribbled freely onto the floor, earning a scowl from the tavernmaid and a chuckle from Gorg, who wiped his mouth with the back of a greasy glove.

“Better than horse piss, eh?” he muttered, thumping the mug down hard enough to rattle the table.

Folga nibbled on a slice of roasted beet, her cloak pulled close around her slender shoulders. The elf looked toward the fire, eyes distant, though her ears never missed a word.

Across the table, Yvanna swirled her drink with idle fingers, the firelight flickering in her amber eyes. She’d been quiet, her mind dancing somewhere behind the smoke.

Gorg leaned in, voice lowered only slightly. “Yvanna. You never told us where you’re from. Greenshore, you said once, but what’s that mean? Where’d you learn to slip a purse like a ghost in daylight?”

Yvanna raised her brow, then smiled faintly. “Greenshore’s a place with more reeds than roofs, more whispers than law.”

She set the mug down gently, the clink soft and deliberate.

“I grew up on the edge of it. My mother ran a drying hut—herbs, mostly. Stank of mint, garlic, and rot. My father? I never met him. Some say he was a sailor who got swept off a barge. Others say he was a knife-for-hire who slipped away before I was old enough to know his face.”

The others leaned in, the din of the tavern softening around them.

“Our hut was barely a home. Half the time, we dried herbs for healing brews. The other half, for poisons. She was never picky about who bought, just who paid on time.”

Yvanna looked toward the fire, her voice quiet but steady.

“By the time I was ten, I was running errands into the town proper. I learned quick—how to duck guards, where the market boys left their sacks unattended, how to trade a handful of dried root for a copper loaf. And when the rains came hard, and no one could pay, I learned how to take what we needed without being seen.”

Gorg scratched his beard. “Sounds rough.”

She shrugged. “It was life.”

Gobol burped, leaned back in his chair, and grunted. “Bet you didn’t do too bad. Anyone who can lift that lock off the tax collector’s chest last month without waking a damn soul’s got stories.”

Yvanna smirked, but didn’t reply.

Yvanna leaned her elbows on the table, resting her chin on folded fingers, her gaze still dappled by firelight. “All right then, Gorg,” she said with a sly smile, “your turn. You never say much about home—besides that mule story, and the jam. Tell us who Gorg really is.”

Gorg paused mid-swig, eyes narrowing in thought. He let out a long, slow exhale through his nose, then leaned back in his chair with a grunt. “Well,” he said, scratching under his chin, “I hail from Bogwater village, nestled in the peat and stone of the lower Breckland slopes. Not much there but wet feet, stubborn goats, and the smell of moss after a thunderstorm.”

He set his mug down with a dull clunk.

“My clan were stonecutters, same as their fathers and their fathers before. We pulled slabs of riverrock and sent ’em downstream on flatboats. Built half the chimneys and hearths in the province, though no one ever remembers the name of the hands that carved ’em.”

He shook his head and smiled without joy.

“I was the youngest of five. Three brothers, one sister. They were all stronger, faster, or smarter. I was the one who’d rather chase frogs or sleep in the hay than swing a chisel. So my father, bless his hammer-soul, put me to work with the goats. Said it might ‘make a stone out of a grain,’ whatever that meant.”

Gobol laughed through his ale. “So you were a goatherd? I can see it now—Gorg, master of bleats!”

“Bah,” Gorg grunted. “It didn’t last. I was fifteen when raiders came—black-sailed riverfolk from the north. Slit the watchman’s throat, torched the grainhouse, tried to take our larders and kin.”

His face darkened.

“I grabbed an axe. Not a warrior’s axe—a woodcutter’s. I wasn’t strong. I wasn’t trained. But I had anger, and fear, and the kind of stubbornness only a goatherd knows.”

He looked around the table.

“I took down two. Barely. Got this scar—” He pointed to a ridge across his jaw. “—and earned my father’s pride. But the village never felt the same after. I didn’t either. I left the next spring, joined a caravan guard, then a mine detail, then a border skirmish militia.”

He picked up his mug again. “Every swing of the axe since has been for something better than goats.”

Folga nodded solemnly. “And now?”

Gorg grinned. “Now I swing it for gold, for comrades, and when the need’s great—for the right cause.”

Yvanna raised her cup. “To Gorg of Bogwater. Goatherd, warrior, and jam enthusiast.”

They all drank to that.

As the mugs clinked and the hearth crackled low, Yvanna turned her sharp gaze toward Gobol, who was already halfway into his fifth ale and humming a low, wandering tune.

“All right, Gobol,” she said, nudging his boot under the table. “Your turn to spill a tale. You’ve got that kind of look—like you’ve run from more than one burning house. Where are you from?”

Gobol wiped foam from his beard, blinked, and belched quietly before setting his mug down.

“I come from Ashborrow,” he said, the name dragging a little as though it tasted of soot. “Deep in the southern ridge where the coal veins run black and endless. It’s not the kind of place you grow up with dreams—it’s the kind of place where your lungs go black before your beard turns gray.”

He reached for a piece of roast pork, chewing slowly before continuing.

“My da was a miner. And his da. And his da before him. I was meant to be, too. By eight, I was hauling carts. By ten, swinging a pickaxe. By twelve, I knew how to read the walls like a priest reads bones. Where the stone was thin. Where it would collapse.”

He paused, looking into the flames.

“And one day, it did. I was fourteen. Shaft thirty-seven collapsed. Killed seven. Da included.”

The table fell silent but for the soft crackle of firewood.

“After that, the foreman tried to say it was sabotage. Claimed Da had drilled too deep near a fault line. But I knew. I saw the bracers—they were rusted through. No maintenance for years. I tried to speak up. They shut me down, fast. Had the guards toss me from the camp with nothing but my boots and a cracked rib.”

Gorg let out a low growl. “Bastards.”

Gobol nodded, eyes distant. “I wandered for a while. Did odd jobs in rail towns, worked as a smelter apprentice, then fell in with a crew of diggers—folk who scouted old ruins for lost coin and relics. That’s where I learned the sword. You don’t dig in ancient places without finding things that bite back.”

Yvanna smiled faintly. “And here I thought you were just a loud drunk with a blade.”

Gobol smirked. “I am. But I’m also a loud drunk with a reason to swing it.”

Folga raised her cup. “To Gobol of Ashborrow—miner turned swordsman, survivor of stone and shadow.”

They drank again, the warmth of memory mingling with the comfort of camaraderie.

Gobol leaned forward, wiping a drop of ale from his beard with the back of his glove, his eyes twinkling now with curiosity rather than drunkenness. “All right, Folga,” he said, pointing a greasy finger toward her. “We’ve all sung our sad songs—now it’s your turn. Where does an elf with fire in her fingers and a cloak full of books come from, eh?”

Folga gave a quiet laugh, brushing a strand of hair from her cheek. Her eyes flicked toward the hearth as though it, too, remembered distant things.

“I was born in Mireford,” she said, her voice soft but clear. “An old elven village tucked into the flooded groves at the bend of the Serin River. It’s not marked on many maps anymore—half-drowned and forgotten, but still clinging to its roots like ivy on stone.”

She folded her hands on the table, her fingers long and calloused from parchment and spellwork alike.

“My mother was a weaver. Not of cloth—of stories. She spun illusions in the village square, conjuring light and sound with a whisper and a flick. My father was a riverwarden—quiet, always watching the banks, the rise and fall of water, the signs left by spirits in the lilybeds.”

She paused, lost for a breath.

“They both vanished when I was twelve. One flood too many. Mireford swells when the Serin grows hungry. Their bodies were never found.”

Silence crept in for a moment before Gorg muttered, “River takes what it wants.”

Folga nodded once. “The elders took me in, let me sleep in the library loft above the herb vault. That’s where I found it—an old spellbook, buried behind mildew and dust. It wasn’t meant for young hands, but I opened it anyway.”

Her eyes gleamed faintly now, as if remembering the first spark.

“It was a relic from the Old Court. Not just tricks and cantrips—real spells. Dangerous ones. Words in languages no tongue should speak. But I learned. Quietly. Patiently. The library taught me more than the river ever could. And when I left Mireford at seventy-five, I was no longer a child of floods.”

Gobol whistled low. “You say that like seventy-five’s an early start.”

“For elves, it is,” Folga said with a faint smile. “I’ve spent the last twenty years wandering. Teaching, learning, unlearning. I’ve chased whispers through ruins, argued with liches, and outwitted a dryad queen who wanted to trade my blood for blooming rights.”

Yvanna raised her mug. “I like you more every day.”

“And I,” Folga said, raising her cup gently, “am glad I’m not walking this world alone anymore.”

They drank to that—four souls with pasts scattered like old bones, now bound by the road and the fire.

The next morning dawned overcast and still. The party made their way through the bustling streets of Sootspire back to the Fighter’s Guild, cloaks drawn against the cool breeze.

Mithander awaited them at the front steps, his lean elven frame more rigid than usual, brows drawn together in quiet concern.

“There’s work,” he said without greeting. “North of here, in the groves past the outer farms. The old cathedral of Erithreal—the one that once belonged to the city—has stirred.”

Folga tilted her head. “Stirred?”

“Ruins don’t whisper,” Mithander replied. “But the forest folk say they’ve heard cries from its stones. Faint light in the windows at night. A shepherd vanished last week. That cathedral was built during the founding age—its stones are as old as Sootspire itself. If something foul now nests there, it must be cleansed.”

He turned to Folga and held out a cloth-wrapped bundle. “You, mage. You’ll take this. Holy water, blessed by Talandra herself. And this—”

He handed her a small tome, bound in pale leather and marked with a silver sun.

“A book of light. Speak its words clearly. Even corrupted stone remembers what it once was.”

The party nodded. Behind them, fifteen other recruits gathered, leather armor creaking, eyes flicking between one another. Most were fresh to combat, some still smelling of the forge or the barracks straw. The party was to lead them.

By midday, they had left the city behind, following winding trails through the dappled woods. The forest grew denser, the canopy crowding overhead until the path became a narrow artery of cracked stone and moss.

After six hours, they emerged into a clearing choked with ivy and fog. Before them rose the skeleton of the old cathedral—its stone frame leaning like a half-fallen giant, its bell tower broken and slanted like a twisted finger. Cracked stained-glass windows glinted dully, fragments of color hanging like shards of memory.

Inside, the air was thick and cold. Shattered pews and broken altars lay strewn like relics of war. The bones of ancient faith crunched beneath their boots—torn scripture, rusted icons, and cracked tile carved with forgotten prayers.

Gorg stepped ahead, the glow of the setting sun throwing long shadows through the fractured glass. “Place smells like old war and grave mold. You feel that?”

Gobol nodded, hand tight around his sword. “Aye. Like something’s watchin’, but won’t say from where.”

Folga moved slowly through the nave, her fingers tracing the broken altar. “These books,” she whispered, picking one up. “Look—blood. But not old. This isn’t from when the place fell.”

Yvanna crouched near an upturned bench, scanning the dust. “Footprints,” she said. “Light, barefoot. And more than one set.”

A crow crackled above them, perched on a high bookshelf, its feathers ragged, eyes gleaming as if it had seen too much. It flapped once, then stilled.

“Anyone still here’s either dead or wishes they were,” Gorg muttered.

Folga opened the book Mithander had given her, reading the first line under her breath. A soft warmth stirred in the air, like a breath held by the stone itself.

“The place remembers,” she said. “But it does not forgive.”

They stepped through the nave’s broken arch and into the overgrown courtyard beyond. Cracked flagstones lay buried beneath moss and tangled ivy, and a crumbling statue of Erithreal, the goddess of balance and law, stood crooked in the center—its face worn blank by time. The sky had dulled to a steel gray, and the air grew suddenly still.

Then, a sound—bones scraping stone. A groan like rusted hinges echoing from the earth itself.

The ground split in thin cracks, and from beneath the ivy and dirt, skeletal hands emerged—dozens of them. Fingers wrapped in shreds of burial cloth. Ribs creaked. Empty sockets stared up as the dead rose.

Forty in all—skeletal warriors wielding rusted swords, jagged bows, cracked shields, armor dented and moss-slick. Their formation staggered at first, then drew together in a dreadful cohesion, as if memory alone held their discipline.

Gorg didn't hesitate. With a guttural roar, he surged forward, battleaxe raised. He cleaved the first skeleton in two, bones scattering across the flagstones. Gobol charged alongside him, short sword driving through a ribcage and shattering a skull with a backhand blow.

The recruits behind them hesitated—then followed, blades drawn, voices rising in fearful cries.

Arrows hissed through the air. One struck a young fighter in the throat—he dropped instantly, blood pooling beneath him. Another recruit screamed as skeletal claws raked her side, dragging her down beneath a swarm of bone and rust. Gorg saw none of it—his world was battle, axe spinning, shield blocking blows from chipped scimitars. Two more skeletons fell beneath his fury.

Yvanna moved quickly along the edge of the chaos, firing arrows into ribcages, aiming for skulls. Her arrows were precise, but there were too many targets. A skeleton leapt from a ruined arch, tackling a recruit beside her. She stabbed her dagger into its spine, twisting until the bones fell apart.

Folga stood near the back, book of light in one hand, holy water in the other. She spoke the words from the silver-marked tome, voice rising above the clash of steel. A glow burst from her hands—three skeletons reeled back, skulls cracking as the light consumed them. But the effort drained her, and she staggered. A recruit leapt to shield her, taking a blade to the gut before falling to his knees.

Gobol was thrown backward, crashing into the base of the statue. A skeleton lunged for him—he grabbed a nearby brick and smashed it into the thing's skull, grinding the bones to dust. His sword lost, he picked up a fallen shield and fought like a cornered beast.

Another fighter screamed—dragged into a corner and overwhelmed. Arrows rained from above; two more recruits fell before they could retreat.

"We're thinning them!" Gorg yelled, covered in grime and blood, axe gleaming. "Hold the line!"

Skeletons now fell faster—shattered by axes, crushed beneath boots, burned by Folga's light. Five lay dead among the recruits, their blood mixing with centuries of dust.

Finally, silence fell. Bone fragments littered the ground like broken teeth. The courtyard stank of sweat, blood, and the strange, cold scent of the undying.

Yvanna lowered her bow. "Five lost. But we're still standing."

Gorg nodded grimly. "This place wants us gone. But it's not done with us yet."

Beyond the desecrated courtyard and shattered chapel, the party and the ten surviving fighters moved deeper into the cathedral's hollowed shell. They passed into a long dining hall, once grand, now choked in layers of dust. Stone tables stood crooked and broken, their surfaces still bearing the ghostly outlines of plates and goblets long since rotted away. A faded tapestry hung limply along the wall, its image of a feast barely visible through the grime.

At the far end of the dinery, a half-collapsed door groaned open to reveal a kitchen. Here, the ruin grew darker—pots overturned, blackened hearths gaping like mouths, and the ceiling draped in thick cobwebs that trembled with the party's every step. In the far corner, a narrow stairwell yawned downward, vanishing into blackness.

"The air shifts here," Folga whispered. "There's something old below."

Two of the fighters pulled torches from the wall sconces and lit them with flint. Flame bloomed against the damp stone, casting long, flickering shadows. With weapons readied, the group descended, boots echoing on the worn stairs. The deeper they went, the cooler the air grew. A steady dripping echoed far off—stonewater, old and constant. The corridor stretched before them in a gentle slope, tight and heavy with silence.

Dust became mist. The cobwebs grew denser, clinging like gauze to arms and armor. Then the corridor curved sharply left—and they came face to face with madness.

Fifteen of them—goatmen. Their eyes gleamed red in the torchlight, twisted horns spiraling from misshapen heads. Muscled limbs, matted fur, and crude, spiked maces clutched in clawed hands. They bared yellow teeth, their breath hot and reeking. With a chorus of snarling bleats, they charged.

The corridor erupted into chaos.

Gorg met the first blow head-on, his shield slamming into the chest of a goatman, knocking it back into two others. He brought his axe down in a brutal arc, splitting a horned skull in half. Gobol roared, plunging his sword deep into another creature's side, wrenching it free with a spray of black blood.

Yvanna fired an arrow into the chest of a goatman mid-leap, then ducked behind a fallen fighter and drew her daggers. She moved fast and low, slicing tendons, dodging maces that shattered stone beside her.

Folga stood behind the line, chanting in an old tongue. She raised her hand and unleashed a flare of light, blinding three goatmen long enough for two fighters to close in and cut them down. But one of the creatures caught a fighter by the throat, lifted him, and smashed him into the wall. The man crumpled, lifeless.

Another goatman swept a mace in a wide arc, breaking a recruit's legs. The man fell screaming, and was quickly silenced by a second blow to the head. The hallway narrowed their movements, forced them into tight, savage combat.

Gorg howled, blood streaming down his arm, and drove his axe through a goatman's ribcage, twisting it free with a grunt. Gobol was slammed backward into the wall, dropping his sword —but he grabbed a torch and shoved it into the face of the goatman that loomed over him, flames igniting fur and flesh.

Yvanna ducked under a swing and drove both daggers into a creature's gut, then kicked it off. Another fighter tried to retreat, but a goatman tackled him, ripping into his throat with jagged teeth.

Folga raised her voice, summoning a surge of arcane fire that engulfed the last three goatmen. They shrieked, spinning and thrashing as they burned, filling the corridor with smoke and the foul stench of scorched fur.

When the echoes died, six of the recruits still stood—panting, bloodied, eyes wide with horror. The rest lay broken and still across the corridor floor, their bodies twisted in the flickering light.

Gorg leaned against the wall, breathing hard. "Whatever's down here," he growled, "it doesn't want to be disturbed."

They stood at the threshold of the hidden sanctuary—walls slick with blood, broken altars dripping gore, and a throne carved of bone where a monstrous figure loomed. Malgath Black-Hoof, his six horns curling like the coils of death, eyes burning with unnatural intelligence, sat upon his bone seat. Flesh sigils stained the floor, and the stench of sacrilege choked the air.

Behind him, fifty goatmen crawled from a pulsating pit, bones scraping and clattering, lips moving in guttural chant. The pit gurgled with red ichor, sealing the chamber in dread.

Malgath rose, towering over even the tallest warrior. His voice rumbled like an ancient tide.

"Mortals," he hissed, voice dripping with contempt, "you dare trespass in the shrine of Black-Hoof. Kneel... or be torn apart by those who remember their blood."

Gorg tightened his grip on his axe, shield ready. He spoke without hesitation.

"We kneel to no beast. Not when crowns made of bone sit heavy on their heads."

Malgath's eyes flicked to Yvanna and Folga, who subtly raised weapons in defiance.

"You are defiant—fierce. But fools." He spat. "My children fear your steel more than your faith."

Folga raised her tome and began whispering hallowed words, light pulsing in her palm despite the darkness.

"Let your words glare then, mage," Malgath sneered. "But not enough to stop the bone tide."

From the pit, the goatmen's whispering grew louder—a chant of broken tongues.

Gobol stepped forward, stance low, eyes hard.

“You ask for obedience,” he said, voice steady. “But all you’ll see is resistance. We do not kneel.”

Malgath barked laughter, the sound reverberating in the chamber.

“Bold. I will enjoy ripping that chorus from your throats.” He pointed up at his throne. “First you, dwarf. Honor calls you to kneel.”

Gorg only snarled, stepping toward the pit.

“Your honor ends at my throne.”

Malgath’s whip snapped in reply. “Then begin the slaughter, you have no chance against our numbers.” Malgath bleated and coughed blood.

The goatmen clicked their weapons and shuffled forward, sealing the fate of all who dared remain standing.

The torchlight flickered across the desecrated throne room as silence fell like a blade. Malgath did not move to strike. Instead, his towering form shifted slightly, golden piercings catching the dim glow of the altars.

“No,” he said at last, voice slow and deliberate, “this is not the hour of death. You stand on the edge of prophecy, not oblivion.”

The pit behind him gurgled, and the goatmen’s whispers grew fainter, as if holding breath.

Malgath stepped down from his throne, hooves cracking the sigil beneath him. “There is a task—one writ in old rot and silence. Beneath this cathedral lies the Abyssal Vault. Within, sealed in flame and ruin, rests the Cursed Sword of Mirovend. Once, it cast us into shadow. Now, it calls to us.”

He bared his teeth. “We cannot touch it. Not yet. But you… you will retrieve it. Bring it here, and your blood may remain within your bodies. Refuse, and your entrails will paint the stone.”

Gorg snarled but held steady. “I don’t kneel to monsters,” he growled. “And I don’t fetch cursed blades for fun. But I’ll drag your precious sword up from the Vault… if only to see what you're afraid of.”

Malgath’s eyes burned brighter. “You mistake fear for reverence. That blade ends cycles. And begins them.”

Behind the party, the surviving fighters looked pale and drained. One, a boy with a split helm, stared into the pit and promptly turned away, heaving up his meager meal onto the stone.

Gobol clapped him on the back roughly. “Better here than later, lad.”

Yvanna looked at the sigil, then at Malgath. “What happens if we return with the sword?”

“You will place it upon the altar. Nothing more. Then walk free, marked by fate but spared the slaughter.”

Folga narrowed her eyes. “And if we choose not to return at all?”

“Then the pit opens, and my children crawl until Sootspire chokes in blood.”

Gorg stepped forward, axe over his shoulder, chin lifted. “We’ll go. But when this is done, I want answers. About why the sword still sings… and what it sings for.”

Malgath dipped his horned head once. “The Abyss awaits.”

With grim resolve and Malgath’s twisted laughter echoing behind them, the party and the six remaining fighters stepped toward the mouth of the fleshy pit. A stairway emerged from the gloom—wet stone, slick with old blood and something thicker, coiled downward into the abyss. Each step groaned underfoot, echoing with ancient tension.

The deeper they descended, the darker it grew. The torches guttered and hissed as they fought against a damp, unnatural chill. The walls tightened, covered in etched glyphs. Pentagrams carved into the stone whispered in fractured languages—scratching at the mind, murmuring fragments of things long buried.

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Folga held her book tightly, eyes flicking warily over the walls. “These sigils... they’re stitched together from broken spells. Like someone tried to seal something they didn’t understand.”

After what felt like an eternity, the stairs widened into a chamber of cold stone. A flicker of blue light danced ahead, ghostly and faint. From that glow, a figure emerged—transparent, tattered robes trailing like smoke. His face bore the weight of sorrow beyond lifetimes.

“Stop,” he intoned, voice hollow as wind through catacombs. “Turn back, while your breath still warms your chest.”

Yvanna raised her bow, but the figure did not advance. Folga stepped forward instead.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“I am Renwald,” the specter said, “High Abbot of Erithreal, keeper of the Vault. I died here, trying to stop the blade’s curse from spilling into the world above.”

Gobol narrowed his eyes. “The sword?”

Renwald’s form flickered. “The Cursed Sword of Mirovend. A blade forged in divine wrath, wielded by a king who sought justice… but paid with his soul. The one who bears it does not live… nor die. They become a thing between.”

Yvanna lowered her weapon slowly. “Then why protect it?”

“Because it must not rise again. The goatmen seek vengeance, yes—but they also serve prophecy. If the sword leaves the Vault, the old wars burn anew. Mirovend’s will remains etched in its steel.”

Behind them, one of the younger fighters—his face pale and drenched in sweat—began to tremble. His eyes widened as if seeing something the others could not.

“They’re speaking to me,” he whispered. “Calling me by name…”

Gorg turned, stepping toward him, but too late.

The fighter screamed and tore off his helmet, eyes wild. “I see the tower! I see the throne of teeth! I—”

He ran, bolting past the group into the black void that yawned beyond the chamber’s edge.

“No!” Gorg shouted, chasing after—but the boy’s scream cut off with a sudden, final silence.

Nothing followed.

Only the distant, throbbing whisper of the sword.

The silence that followed the young fighter’s fall was suffocating. With hearts heavy, the party descended further, the stairs dissolving into uneven ground slick with black moss. The pit opened into a vast, putrid domain of shifting stone corridors fused with living flesh. Walls pulsed with a slow, unnatural rhythm, veins twitching beneath translucent skin. Eyes blinked within cracks, then vanished. This was the Labyrinth of Blasphemy—spoken of only in mad ravings and forgotten scripture.

Gorg grunted, axe raised, as he tested a corner with his shield. “Walls moved. Just now. I swear it.”

Folga nodded grimly. “They rearrange to trap the impure. This maze was meant to contain the cursed and their desires.”

Yvanna narrowed her eyes. “Feels like the maze is watching us.”

From somewhere in the labyrinth's breathing corridors came a scraping sound—like wire dragged over stone. The sound grew louder, then multiplied. Four blind things emerged from the mist-shrouded path ahead—Wailing Janitors.

They were grotesque abominations, their torsos skeletal and hunched, ribcages clacking like wind chimes. Instead of legs, they floated just above the ground, trailing long brooms made of matted hair and steel shards. Their faces were twisted, eyeless, lips sewn shut. And still, they wailed—high, shrill sounds that dug into the bones.

One charged, broom hissing across the ground. Gobol met it with his shield and sword, but the creature's strength was unnatural. It struck with the force of ten men, sending him skidding back.

Gorg roared and intercepted a second one, axe biting deep into its chest. Bone cracked, and a burst of black mist erupted as it fell, its body twitching violently. As it died, the wall beside it shimmered—then parted, revealing a hidden corridor of flesh-lined stone.

"They show the path!" Folga cried. "Kill them!"

Yvanna loosed arrows into a third. It shrieked, hair flailing wildly, until her blade found its throat. The wail cut off, and another wall dissolved, revealing a staircase deeper still.

One Janitor caught a fighter and wrapped its broom around the man's legs, dragging him screaming into the dark. Blood sprayed from behind a twisting wall.

"Keep together!" Gorg bellowed. "Cut 'em down or we'll never find the Vault!"

The last Janitor spun wildly until Folga seared it with a burst of radiant flame. It burst apart in midair, and a third path opened—revealing a black doorway rimmed with old silver.

The maze had parted for now.

But the whispers only grew louder.

The corridor opened into a vast chamber pulsing with unnatural life. The walls were lined with translucent sacs, each the size of a man, suspended from blackened sinew. Inside, twitching, malformed embryos of goatmen floated in crimson ichor, umbilical cords writhing like worms. Above, iron pipes dripped blood into the sacs from a row of pale, unconscious villagers—bound by hooks and chains, their veins siphoned to feed the unborn horrors.

The air was warm, thick with rot and copper, and every breath carried the stench of afterbirth and decay.

Folga raised her hand in horror. "These are breeding vessels… They're making an army."

Then came the sound—a gurgling cackle, wet and deep.

From behind a swollen sac oozed the Broodmother Harzitha. Her body was a grotesque mountain of fur and flesh, supported by swollen limbs twisted by birthing scars. Three goat-

like heads jutted from her shoulders, each bearing a different grotesque expression—one blind, one with fangs like a shark, and one weeping white fluid.

The middle head reared and spat a stream of pale, steaming liquid—corrosive milk—that hit one of the stone pillars and melted it to sludge.

"She's feeding them!" Yvanna shouted, nocking an arrow and firing at the blind head. The arrow thudded into the flesh, but Harzitha roared, summoning twisted, half-formed goatmen still dripping from their sacs. These malformed stillbirths scrambled forward on three limbs, gnashing teeth in blind rage.

Gorg charged, his axe cleaving through the first of the creatures. "These things are fresh! Cut 'em down before they grow claws!"

Gobol was covered in goo as a sac burst near him, the creature inside latching onto his arm. He smashed it into the floor, blood spraying. Folga raised the book of light, chanting a protection verse—golden radiance flared and shattered two sacs, sending Harzitha into a shrieking fury.

The Broodmother charged, her bulk shaking the chamber. She gored one of the remaining fighters with her horned head, lifting him into the air before tossing him against a wall. Another fighter was caught in the corrosive spray, screaming as his armor sizzled and skin blistered.

Yvanna sprinted along the outer edge, leaping onto a ledge and launching arrows into Harzitha's back, drawing her attention long enough for Gorg and Gobol to flank. Gobol drove his sword into one bloated thigh while Gorg leapt and buried his axe in the neck of the weeping head. It fell limp, but the others screamed louder.

Folga, bloodied and panting, drew the last of the holy water and cast it at Harzitha's feet. The fluid hissed as it struck flesh—and with a final chant from her book, a column of divine light erupted from above, searing the Broodmother's form in divine fury.

Harzitha collapsed, steaming and twitching, her bodies convulsing until all three heads were still.

As silence returned, the villagers above stirred. Chains fell loose with a clatter, and the unconscious were lowered gently to the floor by an unseen force.

A warm wind passed through the chamber, scented with lavender and ash. From the air itself, a soft voice echoed—a whisper of gratitude.

"You who broke the cycle… are seen."

A glowing mark appeared briefly on each party member's hand—a sigil of the goddess Mildhed, protector of mothers and the innocent.

Folga looked at it and whispered, "A blessing. From the old gods."

“Then we walk now not just with steel,” Gorg muttered, “but with something watching.”

The path wound downward once more, twisting through dark stone corridors until the air shifted—no longer thick with rot, but still heavy with a strange tension. As the party rounded a final bend, they emerged into a vast, lightless chamber that should not have existed. There before them stood a haunting replica of the surface cathedral—but inverted. Its spires hung downward like stalactites, its pews fastened to the ceiling, and its stained-glass windows pulsed faintly with internal light, shimmering with hues that danced and refused to stay still.

The very air buzzed with a strange resonance, like the echo of a long-dead choir trapped in a loop.

“What in the name of the gods is this?” Gobol muttered, weapon half-raised, eyes scanning the shifting architecture.

“A mirror,” Folga whispered, breath cold. “Not of sight—but of thought. The maze is trying to convince us it’s real.”

The great altar hung upside down above them, glowing softly with unearthly color. Beneath it, floating just inches above the floor, stood a tall figure—its form a sculpture of shattered glass shards held together by nothing visible. Father Reverd.

His face was a jagged mosaic of mirrored fragments, his robes flowing like panes suspended mid-fall. When he turned to face them, the shards reflected not their current forms, but twisted versions—each party member broken, burned, or dead.

“Welcome,” his voice chimed, impossibly soft and cruel. “You’ve come to the Mirror Mass. But I see your truths clearer than you ever could.”

He raised an arm and illusions flared to life. The cathedral erupted with false versions of the party—echoes of themselves that attacked without sound or breath.

Yvanna fired at her doppelgänger, the arrow passing harmlessly through. “We have to find the real one!”

Gorg snarled, rushing forward to cleave through the mirror priest. His axe struck true—but bounced back as if hitting solid air. Reverd laughed, shards reshaping to reform his chest.

“You must break the lie,” he intoned, and cast a beam of fractured light at the ground. It struck one of the five remaining fighters, whose eyes filled with glassy sheen. The man screamed and fell, convulsing, then lay still.

Folga realized it first—chanting a reversal spell from her tome. Her hands glowed with pure, undistorted light, and she struck the shadow of her own false self. The illusion shattered like porcelain, and the ground beneath it crumbled, revealing a vein of raw magic.

“Strike their lies!” she shouted. “Not them—what hides them!”

With that, Gobol tackled his false image into a nearby wall, shattering both the illusion and part of the wall itself. Yvanna darted between flares of mirror-light, daggers in hand, tearing through sigils Reverd had carved into the pews.

Finally, Gorg roared, hurling his axe—not at Reverd—but at the stained-glass window high above. The glass exploded in a shower of color and sound, and Father Reverd's form began to come apart, shards flying in all directions. His voice stuttered like a broken song.

"No… you will not see… you are not worthy—"

The light vanished. The illusions faded.

The false cathedral trembled, then collapsed into a fog of vanishing dust. In its place stood a dark, sealed gate—twenty feet high, ringed in runes. It pulsed like a heartbeat.

Folga stepped forward. "The Vault Gate," she said. "We've broken through the veil."

The Vault Gate loomed before them—an immense arch sculpted not from stone or steel, but from polished gold and ossified teeth. Each fang bore ancient carvings in languages no longer spoken, while veins of dark crimson threaded the gilded metal like dried blood frozen in midflow. The gate pulsed faintly with a sentient rhythm, as though breathing, waiting.

Above its crown, etched in fire-scored runes, read the final verse of a forgotten prophecy:

"Only with the Three Tithes of Mirovend shall the King's Sin be known again."

Folga stepped forward, eyes scanning the glyphs. Her voice dropped into a reverent murmur. "The Eye of Betrayal. The Crown of Sins. The Bone Key of the King. These are the tithes. The price of opening this door."

Gobol spat to the side, resting on his sword. "And I bet none of them are in a bloody drawer somewhere."

Gorg stepped closer, running a calloused hand along the nearest fang. "So we hunt through what's left. Whatever filth crawls down here, we take their treasures from their dead hands."

Yvanna eyed the shadows pooling beyond the passage that splintered left and right. "Then we split up? Cover more ground?"

"No," Folga said sharply. "Whatever guards these things won't be fooled by numbers. We move together. One breath. One steel."

With torches rekindled and weapons ready, the party and the five remaining fighters pressed deeper into the lower levels. The walls here became smoother, black stone veined with dull silver. Time felt slower, the air heavier. Whispers accompanied their steps now, voices that shifted in tone and meaning, echoing words from the past. Promises. Regrets.

They reached the first chamber beneath a crumbling portico—inside, a cracked statue of King Mirovend lay toppled on its side, its eyes hollowed out. Upon a blood-slick altar stood the Eye of Betrayal—an obsidian orb with a red slit, like a reptile's eye, pulsing faintly.

As Gorg stepped toward it, the shadows in the room peeled free from the walls. From them emerged the Guardian of the Eye—a knightly figure made of twisted armor and molten flesh, mouth stitched shut, carrying a blackened flail that screamed with every swing.

The party took stances, and the first of the Tithes would be earned in blood.

The creature guarding the Eye of Betrayal moved like a specter from a forgotten age, its form partially encased in shattered plate armor fused with molten sinew. The air around it rippled with heat and sorrow. Chains dragged from its limbs, dragging across the floor like anchors of regret.

It struck first, the black flail screaming through the air and colliding with Gorg's shield. The impact knocked the dwarf back three steps, his boots digging trenches into the dust. Gobol stepped in immediately, flanking from the side, blade flashing toward the creature's leg—but the guardian twisted unnaturally, absorbing the blow with a surge of dark energy. A chain snapped forward and caught Gobol's wrist, sending him spinning.

Folga began chanting from the back, the book of light glowing against her palm. Sacred fire erupted at the creature's feet, making it shriek without mouth, its stitched jaws trembling. Yvanna, moving quick as wind, loosed an arrow that sank between plates of twisted armor.

Gorg roared and leapt forward again. This time his axe found flesh beneath metal. The guardian staggered, black blood spilling, steaming as it hit the cold floor. It responded with a wild backhand from the flail that caught one of the remaining fighters in the chest, crushing his ribs instantly.

"Focus your strikes!" Folga called out. "It weakens when burned!"

Together they attacked with renewed purpose. Gobol smashed the creature's knee, Yvanna plunged her dagger into the chain-bound shoulder, and Folga's spell ignited its helm in radiant flame. Gorg swung once, twice—then a third time, cleaving through the neck. The guardian collapsed in a convulsing heap, the flail silenced at last.

The Eye of Betrayal pulsed brighter. Folga stepped forward and lifted it from the altar. It blinked once in her hand and went still.

"That's one," Yvanna whispered.

They didn't pause long. Hours later, deeper within the ruins, they found the chamber of the second tithe.

The Crown of Sins rested atop a rusted throne encircled by chains and shattered bones. The air here was thick with hallucination—visions of past sins played in flashes across the walls, each party member seeing twisted reflections of themselves. Around the throne circled a

specter of Mirovend's regrets—an ethereal doppelgänger of the King, wearing the faces of his slain children, bound to a loop of sorrow.

It moved with silence and struck with the force of memory itself—striking where they hesitated, preying on guilt. Yvanna saw herself stealing from a village elder. Gobol relived the cave-in that killed his father. Gorg saw himself abandoning comrades on a failed campaign.

But they pushed through. Folga's chants restored clarity, and Yvanna drove a dagger through the mirage's chest. It vanished in a silent sigh, and the Crown of Sins toppled from the throne, landing with a hollow clang. Gobol picked it up, hands trembling slightly.

The descent into the Vault's lowest sanctum felt like plunging into the breath of a dead god. The air turned thin, lifeless. The corridor narrowed into a jagged throat of rock and bone, lit only by the glow of Folga's book and the faint pulse of the Eye of Betrayal cradled against her chest. They came to a final door—carved from stone, inlaid with veins of ivory. There, in the center, a skeletal hand gripped a rusted scepter, the digits locked in place. Embedded in its palm, covered in flaking gold leaf, was the Bone Key of the King.

"Why do I feel like we're not alone?" Gobol muttered, his voice barely a breath.

From the ceiling, the walls, the floor itself—bones began to stir.

The remains of kings, of traitors, of those sacrificed to seal the Vault rose as one. Skeletal forms in regalia of ancient war, bearing the crests of dead provinces long erased from maps. They did not walk—they glided, eyes aglow with pale green fire, silent but for the rattle of regalia and rusted blade.

The Bone Assembly.

The room was tight, barely enough space for maneuvering. The five remaining fighters formed a ring around the party, but one was dragged down almost instantly as bone-bladed spears pierced him from all sides.

Gorg stepped forward, pushing to the hand. "We take the key, we finish this!"

"No," Folga said, eyes wide. "The bones guard the key. To take it, we must speak his name."

She turned to the rest of the party, flipping through the pages of her tome. "Not Mirovend… not the king he was, but the man. His childhood name. Hidden in the lineage… wait…"

The battle raged. Gobol disarmed one skeleton only to be tackled by two others, forced to fight them off with a dagger. Yvanna leapt atop a broken column, firing arrows into skulls that splintered under pressure.

"Avareth," Folga whispered, finding the name. "His mother called him Avareth."

She stepped forward, held out her palm, and spoke the name aloud:

“By blood and bone, by sin and soul—I call thee Avareth.”

The Bone Assembly froze. One by one, they dropped their weapons, turned toward the skeletal hand… and bowed.

The hand released the scepter.

The Bone Key of the King fell into the dust.

Gorg bent down and picked it up, cradling it as if it were a relic of divine weight. “Let’s go open that damned gate.”

With the three tithes in their possession—the Eye of Betrayal, the Crown of Sins, and the Bone Key of the King—the party stood once more before the Vault Gate. Its golden fangs shimmered faintly in the dark, slick with a sheen of ancient dread. Gorg stepped forward, handing the Bone Key to Folga, who inserted it into the lock embedded in a curled incisor. The Eye and Crown were placed in their respective hollows—one atop a cracked pedestal, the other into the brow of a skeletal relief above the gate.

For a moment, nothing.

Then came the scream.

A sound unlike anything they’d ever heard, part iron, part wind, part the cry of something remembering its own death. The gate cracked open—not like a door, but like a wound splitting. From it surged a descending wind, dry and cold, carrying voices in old tongues. The temperature dropped sharply; even Gorg’s breath fogged.

They entered slowly, one by one, torches fluttering in the breath of the Vault’s heart.

The chamber within was a cathedral of darkness, ringed with statues of the kings and queens of old. All eyes were turned inward—to the center, where a monument of black stone rose like an altar. Upon it stood a statue of King Mirovend, larger than life, carved in exquisite detail—except his face was twisted in agony, blood trickling eternally from stone eyes.

And there, impaled in the statue’s chest, was the Sword of Mirovend.

Its blade pulsed with necrotic light—dark violet veins coiling up the hilt. A low hum filled the air, like breath held beneath water. The closer they stepped, the heavier their bodies felt.

“It’s alive,” Folga whispered. “Or thinks it is.”

Gorg stepped closer, staring at the blade. “So… who takes it?”

“Whoever does,” said Yvanna, “faces a test. The sword doesn’t serve. It consumes.”

“The legends were true,” said Gobol, voice low. “It drinks the soul, one thought at a time.”

Gorg glanced over his shoulder, then back at the blade. “I’ll pull it.”

“Wait,” Folga said, stepping beside him. “You must be ready. The sword will test your will. If your mind falters—even for a moment—it will hollow you out and wear your skin like a crown.”

Gorg grunted. “Then I’ll be stronger than it.”

He placed both hands on the hilt, his gauntlets echoing faintly on the blackened metal.

The statue trembled.

The chamber darkened.

And the test began.

As Gorg’s hands closed around the hilt of the Cursed Sword, the vault seemed to vanish. The chill air, the stench of death, the breathing darkness—all faded. He stood suddenly alone, barefoot, upon a bridge of broken stone suspended in a void of swirling gray mist. Below him, nothing. Above him, thunderclouds churned like boiling ink.

Across the bridge stood another figure—himself.

But not as he was.

This Gorg was rotted from within, his eyes black pits, his armor scorched and cracked, his battleaxe rusted and blood-drenched. The reflection grinned, revealing teeth sharpened like knives.

“So,” it said in his voice, “you’re the fool who thinks he can wield the legacy of a king.”

Gorg snarled. “I’m no king. But I’ve broken worse things than you.”

The reflection stepped forward. “This isn’t about strength. This sword doesn’t test the body. It tests the soul. And yours is full of doubt. Regret. Blood you never washed off.”

Gorg tightened his grip on the phantom axe that now materialized in his hands. “I’ve done what needed doing.”

“And you’ll do more,” the reflection hissed. “You’ll spill more blood. You’ll justify it. Until your comrades are ash and you wear this sword like a shackle.”

“Maybe,” Gorg said. “But if I fall, it’ll be fighting for something. Not kneeling to a ghost in the mirror.”

The reflection lunged. The bridge shook.

Steel met steel—echoes crashing like thunder.

Gorg battled himself, blow for blow. Every strike from the reflection came with a whisper of past mistakes—names of the dead, cries of wounded allies, the laughter of Malgath echoing through his mind.

But Gorg did not falter.

He fought harder, not to win, but to endure. To be the wall.

“I remember every name,” he growled between strikes. “Every comrade. Every kin.”

He struck the reflection’s arm—shattering bone.

“I remember my mother’s grave.”

He shattered a leg.

“And I remember the day I swore I’d never kneel.”

He brought the axe down through the reflection’s skull.

The vision exploded in black ash.

The mist vanished.

Gorg stood once more in the vault, the real vault, with the sword in his hand.

It pulsed, once, but no longer fought him.

He had passed the test.

The party stared in silence as he stepped down from the altar, sword in hand, eyes glowing faintly with the remnants of deathless light.

“It’s done,” he said.

The vault door moaned open as the party emerged once more into the desecrated throne room. The flickering altars still bled. The throne of bone loomed as before—but Malgath Black-Hoof stood now in its shadow, awaiting them with burning eyes.

Gorg stepped forward, the Cursed Sword of Mirovend gripped tightly in one hand. Every step he took made the chamber colder.

Malgath raised his horned head slowly. “You return... and you carry destiny.”

The fifty goatmen lining the chamber began to chant low, clicking bones and stomping hooves in rhythm with a heartbeat not of this world.

Gorg lifted the sword. “We have it. What now?”

Malgath’s voice slithered through the air. “You give it. As promised. And in return, you walk free—flesh intact, souls spared.”

Gobol growled, stepping beside Gorg. “And what will you do with it?”

The six-horned goatman smiled wide, golden piercings shimmering in the torchlight. “What is written. What is owed. The age of man has stumbled. Now the wound reopens. And through it, I shall ascend.”

Folga’s voice trembled with rage. “You’ll bring a plague upon the world.”

“I will bring justice,” Malgath hissed. “The kind Mirovend denied us when he wielded this sword. Now, with it returned, the flesh of tyrants shall burn anew.”

Yvanna pulled her bow but Gorg raised a hand.

“We give it,” he said quietly. “We don’t die here.”

Folga opened her mouth to protest, but saw the fifty goatmen stirring, weapons drawn. The fleshy pit behind Malgath began to pulse faster, as if waiting for a feast.

Gorg stepped forward, lifted the sword high... and plunged it, hilt-first, into the dais before Malgath.

The throne room erupted with light.

Malgath seized the blade, howling in triumph. A storm of blood and fire coiled around him as he raised it to the darkened ceiling. His form stretched, bones cracking, muscles tearing, reshaping. Wings of sinew and ash unfolded. His horns curled into a crown. The transformation had begun.

The party stepped back, shielding their eyes.

“We’ll live,” Gorg said grimly, “but what we’ve let loose… we’ll have to face again.”

The throne room buckled as Malgath lifted the cursed sword skyward, his body unraveling into a horror beyond flesh. Black fire rippled from his hooves; his golden piercings melted into molten veins that laced through his expanding frame. Wings like flayed parchment erupted from his back, and a crown of writhing antlers split his skull. The Goat-Demon was being born.

“Stop him!” Folga cried, her voice nearly lost in the rising shrieks of the goatmen.

The fifty once-chanting minions surged forward, now twice as fast, eyes glowing red, mouths foaming with eldritch rage. The four remaining supporting fighters clashed with them—one gutted instantly, another ripped down into the fleshy pit, his scream cut short.

“Fall back to the altar!” Gorg bellowed, hacking through a charging goatman, his axe splitting the creature in half.

Yvanna fired shot after shot, her quiver nearly empty. One arrow pierced a goatman’s eye, another caught in a jaw. Still they came, clawing, screaming, their claws raking armor and skin.

Gobol fought with brutal efficiency, smashing one with his shield, running another through. “We’re not going to last much longer!”

Behind them, Folga stood at the cracked altar, her spellbook glowing, her hands trembling with glyphs mid-air. Yvanna dropped beside her, handing her the last two vials of holy water.

“You have one chance,” Yvanna panted. “Make it count.”

“I will,” Folga whispered. “But the sword must go. Into the pit. That’s the key.”

Gorg turned. “Then we throw it in!”

“No,” Folga said. “Someone has to carry it. The backlash—it won’t let it go so easily.”

The moment fell silent—until Gobol stepped forward.

“I’ll do it.”

Everyone turned.

Gorg blinked. “Gobol—no—”

“I’ve no family,” he said. “No line. But you lot—you’re my kin now. I’ll give you time.”

He took the sword from where it lay, now steaming with shadow.

“Tell the bards to get my name right,” he grinned, blood running down his beard.

Then he charged.

A dozen goatmen swarmed to intercept him—but he plowed through them like a rolling wall of fury, shoulder-checking one into a pillar, cleaving two more down. Flames burst from his shield as Malgath screamed, sensing the blade's aim.

Gobol leapt.

The sword pierced the pit, burying itself deep—and the air detonated.

The ritual circle collapsed into fire and screaming wind. The Goat-Demon howled, his form fracturing, burning from the inside out. A tidal wave of magical force hurled the party back, crashing them into columns and rubble.

Gorg landed hard, bloodied and barely breathing. Yvanna’s leg twisted beneath a chunk of stone. Folga clutched her book, eyes wide in shock, ears ringing. The last two fighters were dead, broken in the collapse.

The cathedral cracked at the foundation. Walls folded inward. Statues fell. Flames erupted from every altar.

The party limped, half-dragged, through the falling ruins, blood running from their noses and ears.

As the last of the cathedral collapsed behind them, sealing the pit forever, the sky above the forest broke open—sunlight piercing through the clouds.

Gobol stumbled out of the rubble-draped archway, coughing and spitting grit—but he stood. His beard, singed and matted, shook as he shook the dust from his shoulders. Yvanna's eyes widened. "By the gods… Gobol!"

He reached the others, each battered, broken, but alive. Gorg offered him a hand. "Thought you were gone, loud tongue."

Gobol groaned, then chuckled weakly. "Surprise."

Above them, the sky split with searing beams of white-fire. Rain-like arcing pillars scorched the earth, scorching the forest floor and washing embers from the collapsed ruins. The land trembled, as if in purification.

Moments later, from the edges of the clearing, villagers emerged—haggard, shaken, but whole. One woman, with streaks of ash in her hair, fell to her knees. "We saw the light… felt the cleansing. You've saved us."

Another man, clutching a bundle of herbs and a torn tunic, spoke with awe. "You're heroes. Blessed—by whatever's above or below."

They gathered to help the party—bandaging wounds, offering water, and murmurs of gratitude. Children peeked from behind trees, eyes wide in wonder at the ragged warriors and the sword of terrible beauty and terror at Gorg's side..

The party gained something beyond gratitude that day: renown. Tales spread like wildfire through the Vale and into Sootspire. Their names would be carved into stories, though the darkness of the sword would shadow them still.

Night deepened over the charred clearing. The sword, still pulsing, whispered in Gorg's mind: dark, demonic words woven from promise and threat. Yvanna caught the edge of a phrase, "...your soul belongs…"

In exile dreams, Folga heard distant frog-song morph into muffled cries for blood. Gorg awoke to cold mists, shadowed eyes digging for him in empty halls.

The party lay on the grass amid the survivors' blankets, bodies sore, breaths ragged, wounds still raw. They raised chipped healing potions and swallowed them with grim resignations—sour metal gripped in throats, bile rising.

When the potions' edges failed to still the pain, Folga drew her spellbook. Mana crackled at her fingertips as she whispered the ancient verses of restoration. A soft silver light washed over them, sealing torn flesh and soothing seared nerves. Wounds knit, though bruises remained deep, and exhaustion weighed heavier than any stone.

“We’ll live,” she whispered, voice low but steady. Around her, the others stirred—Gorg’s teeth clipped and cracked, Gobol’s stare distant, Yvanna’s eyes glassed and haunted.

Gorg reached and touched the sword’s hilt, as if wondering whether the cold metal would bite back.

But for that moment, they were alive—and together.

Above, the sky brightened. The air was purer, though the forest bore scars of what had passed. And somewhere, beneath the earth, the cursed blade whispered on, waiting for the veil to thin again.

They stumbled into the Fighter’s Guild’s common hall late that night, the weight of exhaustion pressing on every step. Mithander was waiting, his face pale but steady as he guided them into the barracks’ bunk beds.

“Lay down,” he whispered, helping Gorg onto a lowest berth. “You did what no others could.”

Gorg met his gaze, muscle weary but proud. He placed the battered Sword of Mirovend into Mithander’s hands—its blade flickering with silent life.

“We found this,” Gorg said, voice hoarse. “By accident… during the purge. Goatmen, the Broodmother, Malgath—he was a goat-demon. We sealed the pit. Sword came free of the altar.”

Mithander’s eyes widened as he cradled the relic like a newborn. He looked up at the party, then nodded.

“Your work has ended the curse’s spread… at least for now. Here.”

He produced a heavy sack of shimmering coin. Within, tooled leather clinking with metal.

“Seven-hundred and fifty gold and silver,” Mithander said, voice thick. “For your wounds, your courage, and the lives saved beyond that cathedral’s walls.”

Gorg blinked, emotion catching him off-guard. “We… thank you.”

Yvanna rasped out a quiet thanks, and Folga smiled with exhaustion. Gobol—lean and pale—simply nodded, words lost to fatigue.

Mithander settled the sword on a nearby table and stepped back.

“I will have the king’s squire here by first light. The sword will be sent to the Keep in Zarothia—examined, archived, and displayed before the noble court, where it belongs.”

Gorg’s eyes narrowed in the dim torchlight. No words followed; sleep claimed him.

Within moments, all four were silent.

At dawn, Mithander rose and approached the sword. Its blade dark gleamed in the early light. He knelt, murmuring a brief invocation to Erathis, then stood as a crisp knock sounded at the guildhall door.

Moments later, a young squire in princely livery entered, flanked by two stoic guards. He bowed deeply.

“Squire Tinor, at your service, sir. I will escort this relic to the royal Keep in Zarothia as ordered.”

Mithander nodded and lifted the sword from the table, handing it carefully to the squire. The guards flanked the squire as they exited, the sword carried between them like a sovereign’s burden.

The guild fell silent after the guard’s steps echoed down the corridor.

Mithander folded his hands, gazing after them.

And as he crossed himself, the sword’s blade seemed to pulse once more.

The next seven days passed in a soft blur of healing and routine. In the Fighter’s Guild barracks, the party slept deeply, ate hearty stews and roast venison, and made space for aching muscles to repair. Mithander checked on them each evening, offering quiet encouragement, but warned gently that no work was available for now.

By the end of the week, the four friends looked more like themselves again, though every step still bore the memory of the cathedral’s horrors.

Ashbarrow

They moved to the Mighty Deer that evening, renting a single room with bunk beds by the fireplace. Steam curled from the hot tub in the corner, and the air smelled of pine and soap. One by one, each shed armor and fatigue in the warm water.

Gorg leaned back, eyes closed, and muttered, “Never thought bubbles could feel this good.”
Gobol cracked a weary grin. “Swear I feel lighter by half.”
Yvanna scrubbed her bowstring clean. “No ash this time, thank the gods.”
Folga breathed in the scented steam. “Let’s make this last a little longer.”

Downstairs, they claimed their usual corner table. The innkeeper, the barrel-stout halfling, greeted them with a booming laugh and a tray of hearty food: pork shanks glazed in honey and root-sauce, buttered turnip mash, thick slices of smoky cheese, and pots of savory mushroom stew. Each was crowned with a tankard of dark ale—rich, bitter, and comforting.

Gobol knocked his mug against Gorg’s. “To healing.”
Gorg grinned and drank: “To living.”

By the third night, the inn was their home. They swapped stories with travelers, challenged a pair of dwarves to a friendly ale-drinking competition (which Gorg and Gobol won handily), and Folga amused the barmaids with tales of magical mishaps.

On night five, after a long meal of spiced venison and flatbread, Yvanna leaned forward. "We've rested. A week here… but we're fighters. We should move."

Gorg nodded, wiping crumbs from his beard. "Aye. We've earned the rest. But the road's calling."

Folga unfurled a rough map of Ashbarrow—a tangled forest rumored to hold an abandoned wizard's tower and hidden elven shrines. "Treasure," she said softly, placing her finger on the map's center. "We restocked potions, sharpened blades. We could spend another gold and take our chances."

Gobol grinned wide. "Plus, I've heard stories of old dwarven caches buried near the ridge. Could be coin in old rock."

Yvanna tapped the table. "Then it's settled. We leave tomorrow. Pack light and fresh."

Gorg slammed his mug on the table. "To Ashbarrow. May it test us less than the cathedral."

They raised their tankards and drank deeply. The fire crackled. Outside, dusk settled quiet. Within, a hopeful oath was made—no prophecy, no politics, no cursed swords. Just four comrades, a map, and whatever lay ahead in the woods of Ashbarrow.

The morning sunlight filtered through tavern windows as the party rose, refreshed yet eager. They spent the morning in Sootspire's market, purchasing sturdy backpacks equipped with bedrolls, flint kits, dried rations, and modest fishing lines—simple gear for a week in the wilds.

Around noon, they set out. Their path led across rolling meadows and through rolling hills toward Ashbarrow. By mid-afternoon, the forest's edge loomed before them. Gnarled trunks rose into a dusting of pale mist resting on the forest floor. Branches intertwined overhead, casting dark mosaics across their shoulders.

They walked for hours in companionable silence, the forest muted save for their boots crunching on fallen leaves and distant crows calling at dusk. Eventually, the trail forked. To the right, a faint footpath disappeared among ancient pines.

"Looks worn," Yvanna whispered, stepping off the main track.

They followed.

A few minutes later, an old figure appeared—lean and moss-clad, with antlers crowning his weather-worn hood. His eyes were calm emeralds beneath a crown of lichen. He leaned on a staff carved with vine motifs.

“Who walks in Ashbarrow this night?” he asked, voice soft and echoing like wind through branches.

Gorg raised his hand in greeting. “We are travelers,” he said. “I am Gorg, this is Gobol, Folga, and Yvanna.”

The druid nodded slowly. “What do you seek in these woods?”

Yvanna stepped forward. “We’ve heard tales of ruins—possibly elven or dwarven—from long ago. We seek them to map and explore. Anything old, abandoned, even if haunted.”

The druid’s eyes darkened with memory. He drew a slow breath.

“There is one,” he said. “An elven outpost from the days before the Pact of Greenwood—over three centuries past. It stood at the southern edge of Ashbarrow, a slender fortress of marble and sapwood. The elves built watchtowers reaching above the canopy, with runes of warding etched into the pillars.”

Gobol cocked an eyebrow. “Sounds magnificent.”

The druid continued:

“Elven scouts brought word of strange noises one night. Screams, whispering in unspoken languages. They rushed to investigate. By dawn, the outpost was lifeless. Every elf was gone—no sign of blood, no battle, no body. Only silence and footprints, small and clawed, leading into the deepest parts of the wood.”

Folga exchanged a solemn look with Yvanna.

“The elven moonwardens sealed the ruins with wards,” the druid said. “They believed fey warlocks or perhaps something darker had taken the bodies. The footprints—half-animal, half something else—were said to belong to creatures of the shifting wood. Beastkin? Fey twisted by old magic? The wards were left to rot as the elves departed, fearful of undoing whatever had claimed their kin.”

The druid held out a gnarled hand, palm up. “Take this path. It will lead you to the ruins. But I warn you: at night, lights may shine among the broken towers. Voices echoing. If you hear them, turn away. Not all who enter return unchanged.”

Gorg nodded. “We appreciate the warning.”

The druid offered one final caution. “Ashbarrow is older than most know. It remembers those who walk lightly… and those who return with blood on their hands.”

With that, he melted into the mist beyond the trees.

The party stood silently for a moment. Then, as twilight deepened, they shouldered their packs and pressed on—each feeling the weight of unseen eyes watching from the forest’s shadows.

The forest swallowed their footsteps as twilight deepened, the air moist and heavy. For multiple hours they walked on a muddy footpath, the forest was quiet, a lonely crow sat on a branch making no sound and watched them. After some time they arrived at the ruins. Tel'Faryn Ruins lay before them — shattered marble spires, slick with moss, leaning like ancient sentinels. Vines lined the archways, strangling the once-grand doorways. Elven crests cut into stone had been defaced: symbols scraped away, some burned, as if in desecration.

"No bodies," Yvanna murmured, eyes narrowed. "They've been moved."

They slipped inside the moss-choked courtyard. The scent of decay was strong, but not fresh. Shards of armor lay scattered, dented and rusted, remnants of what must have been desperate last stands. But no bones, no blood—only echoes of violence amid the wet stone.

Folga knelt by a smashed helmet stubbed with claw-mark gouges. "They didn't just die — they were dragged away."

Gobol knelt beside a tree, tracing deep claw gouges in the bark. "Something didn't just fight — it left signs of its passing."

Yvanna pointed further into the overgrown central hall. "Look there — circular impressions in the ground. Bones pressed flat, forming rings. Signs of ritual."

Gorg examined the soil. "Someone built a circle of bones here recently — and didn't bother burying them."

They moved into a fallen hallway where broken barrels teetered on supports, wooden crates collapsed and covered in cobwebs. One chest remained, lid missing, hinges rusted, empty except for thick webs.

"Loot stolen?" Yvanna asked softly.

"Perhaps by the same creatures," Folga responded.

As darkness fell, the party set camp inside what must have been a courtyard. They pitched lean-to tents against broken columns and piled wet wood for a small fire. The flickering flames threw shadows across the defaced walls, vines creaking in the night wind.

Around the fire, they spoke in low tones.

"So," said Gorg, breaking the silence. "They didn't die here. They were taken… for what purpose?"

Folga stared into the flames. "Because the ruins are sacred. Maybe they were used for something they shouldn't have been."

Gobol leaned back, shield under his head. "I don't like bones on the ground pretending to be doors. Feels like a trap."

Yvanna poked the chest with a stick. “Empty chest, webs, claw-marks… whoever was here didn’t stay. And they’ve been here recently. We should rest, but stay alert.”

Gorg nodded. “We’ll stand watch in turns. Dawn, we map the ruins deeper — halls, subchambers. Try to figure who moved bodies, and what they want with them.”

They ate cold stew and hard bread, steam mingling with mist. The night was silent but for the creak of wood and the soft drip of condensation. No sounds of movement, no howls — only the distant sigh of rotten stone settling after centuries.

They fell asleep in their tents, weapons close, minds contemplative. The ruins waited around them, silent and watchful, the forest kept its secrets for the next day.

Night in Ashbarrow pressed in with a living weight. The fire’s warmth curled into cold darkness, the trees arching overhead like skeletal fingers. A dense mist hovered just above the wet mossy floor, muffling footsteps and dampening sound. In the branches overhead, a lone crow stared, motionless, its glossy black eye unblinking. Even the wind had stilled; leaves trembled only as if unsettled by unseen breath.

At first, the campfire flickered alone. Then came a faint clatter—metal scraping bone—from deep within the forest. It echoed like a grinding warning. The party froze awake. Gorg tightened his grip on Gorg’s axe; Gobol’s eyes darted into black-shaded trunks; Yvanna’s bowstring twanged silently in tension; Folga’s face reddened, hand grazing the holy water at her belt.

They looked at each other but stayed still. The only living witness was the crow, fluffed against the chill wind, its silhouette striking in the dim light.

Drip.

Silence.

Rattling again, softer now, distant.

Then, beneath the trees, they heard low breathing—labored, uneven. The crow’s wings flicked once, and it glided away in a silent glide, vanishing into the shadows.

They said nothing more that night. Each took their watch in silence without sleep, eyes straining against blackness until dawn’s first grey light.

In morning’s cold hush, they gathered at the ruins’ edge.

“We wait no longer,” Gorg said quietly. With his axe, he parted the vines, then crawled forward.

He paused. “It’s... .” A woman’s body lay among ferns and wet needles, naked and torn. Her stomach was opened, as if someone—or something—had rooted through every living organ. Her eyes were gone, blank orbits. The body was pristine everywhere else—no signs of

clothing struggle, no footprints except around her torso—but the chest and face were mutilated with sick precision.

Shivering, Folga knelt and closed the woman's eyelids, though there were no eyes left. "A ritual... or a trophy."

Yvanna crouched beside her. "Whoever did this wanted something. Not meat. Something sacred."

Gobol stood above them, scanning the trees. "Thick prints," he observed, pointing toward a path veiled by mist. "Tall—hoofed, cloven. Tracks lead deeper into the forest."

"More than one pair," Folga added. "And they're fresh. The body's warm."

Gorg knelt and let his fingers slide through the woodland floor. "These tracks." He traced them. "Large—more than a goatman. Something today, awake. And waiting."

Yvanna stood, shoulders stiff. "We can't stay here. We learn what we need—then we find them. And kill them." Party packed their camp.

The crow, silent sentinel perched high in the branches, tilted its head as their voices rose over the damp moss.

Folga looked up, meeting its gaze. "We're on their trail now," she said softly. "Let's pray we're not walking into a trap."

The forest inhaled their words, mist swirling around their legs. And somewhere deeper in the pines, something watched—and waited.

Mist sharpened the air as evening deepened in Ashbarrow. They trudged through a forest thick with moss and fallen needles, the sky a dim, reversing twilight. Gnarled tree roots clawed at their boots, and the damp of rotting wood rose in cold puffs with each step.

Gobol pointed ahead, following dried scraps of flesh splattered across lichen-clad bark. "These aren't fresh kills," he said low. "Someone's dragging meat—bait or warning."

Along the path they passed strange totems: antlers bound with sinew, smeared in dark stains, hanging from broken branches. Each crimson drip glistened in the last rays of waning light.

Yvanna narrowed her eyes, scanning: "They're setting us up. They don't want to fight in the open."

Gobol nodded. "They're sneaky. Going for ambush trails."

By nightfall they paused beside a shallow pit—lined with sharpened bones and spikes, covered with brittle branches. Gorg dropped a stone onto it; the wood cracked, revealing the trap.

"That's nasty enough," he muttered. "Lucky we found it."

They leaned back, weapons drawn, as darkness descended with unnatural speed.

Yvanna's breathing became shallow. She pressed her palm to a tree trunk. "They're watching —eyes everywhere." The forest closed in around her. Every shadow became a silhouette. Every rustle meant movement. She swallowed hard, voice tremulous. "I... I see someone run past—horned, hairy legs, gone before I blinked."

Gorg scanned the gloom. "Eyes open, everyone. We're being watched. They're everywhere. Stay sharp."

Folga cloaked herself in mana for protection, voice low: "Let's stay spread, but tight enough at a glance. No moment of surprise for them."

Gobol's beard bristled. "I hate ambushes. Hate 'em."

Deep into the second watch, they heard light footsteps circling—a distant branch snap. Gorg growled and crouched. Yvanna notched an arrow ready. Gobol planted himself at Gorg's side, sword unsheathed. Folga gripped her staff, eyes flicking from whisper to whisper in the undergrowth.

Gorg whispered: "They want us hunting them? Fine. We hunt back."

Yvanna blinked against the oppressive dark. "If we're walking into the teeth of something... we go together. No one's left behind."

The forest pressed closer, but somehow, by treading lightly and staying alert, the party continued deeper into its heart—locked in a quiet, deadly stalemate. Each step forward felt like a gamble, but none turned back. Shadows waited. They moved in return. The game had begun.

A low fog drifted through the trees as the party pushed deeper into Ashbarrow. Finally, the dense boughs gave way, revealing a forgotten elven stone pool nestled in a natural clearing. Once carved and used for rituals, the pool was long dried—its marble cracked and pocked with lichen. But tonight it was filled again, with water stained a deep, stagnant red.

Around the rim lay a grisly scene: flayed animal carcasses—fox, deer, boar—arranged in grotesque displays. Their skulls, bleached and cracked, were painted with white ash and strange symbols, as though marking some dark purpose. The whole tableau shivered with menace under the moonlight.

Gorg crouched beside the pool, axe in hand, voice low and tense.
"Blood in the water," he muttered. "This was made for them."

Gobol hovered behind him. Steadying his breathing, he scanned the tree-line.
"Watch your backs," he said quietly. "They're close."

A scattered movement flickered at the edge of sight: a hunched figure stepped into the clearing. It looked humanoid—but twisted. It had goat legs, fur clumped with rot and blood.

Its ribcage was tied shut with sinew, ribs visible beneath tight skin. Its head was bowing as if blind—empty eyeless sockets glowing dull in the torchlight. It paused, head tilting, nostrils flaring.

Yvanna pressed a hand to her bowstring. “Got sight of it, yeah?”

Folga tensed, her voice barely more than a whisper. “What is it?”

The creature made a soft, rasping breath—but did not move toward them. Instead, it blinked… or tried to. It seemed uncertain.

Gorg took a step forward.
“Show yourself,” he called out, voice gentle but firm.
The figure twitched, as if unsettled by Gorg’s presence, and then—without warning—backed into the shadows and vanished.

Gobol lowered his shield.
“It wasn’t aggressive… yet.”

Yvanna exhaled a shaky breath.
“Cautious. Intelligent. Creepy as damned.”

Folga stepped forward, inspecting the markings around the pool.
“The symbols… they speak of sacrifice and binding. This is ritual ground. And they keep it protected.”

Gorg stood.
“We approach careful, we watch, and we learn. But we don’t kill on sight. Not yet.”

They formed a loose circle around the pool, eyes scanning every shadow, senses honed. No other creature emerged. Silence returned—oppressive, expectant, never truly empty.

Yvanna broke it, voice determined:
“Let’s set camp downwind. We’ll wait and see what comes next.”

Gobol turned toward the trees, sword ready and shield raised.
“Agreed. Eyes open. Someone’s watching us now, too.”

They trailed back into the trees, hearts pounding louder than the forest stillness. But now, each step was purposeful—driven not by exploration, but by the pressing need to understand the horrors hunting them in the dark.

The glade lay before them like an open wound in the forest. Bone fences—built of ribcages and vertebrae—ringed the clearing. Within, dark pits yawned, filled with festering carrion. A half-circle of rotting goatmen hunched over their gruesome banquet, muttering guttural bleats in a tongue barely human. Torches fashioned from bone and fat burned dimly, casting waves of yellow stench across the night air.

The damp forest behind them grew eerily silent, as if the world itself paused to listen. Feral goatmen's guttural murmurs echoed off mossy trunks.

Gorg tensed, gloved hand gripping axe. "We found their lair."

Yvanna crouched low, her arrow trained on their first target—a malformed goatman hunched by a pit, its bones protruding through rotten flesh. "They're... eating the dead."

Gobol unsheathed his sword. "Failed experiments? Twisted by the sword's curse—or some wild druid's magic."

Folga scanned the pits, unseen horror reflected in her eyes. "Some descended into madness—they survived the infection or the ritual… but lost anything like sanity."

Without warning, a horned creature reared and charged toward Folga. Yvanna fired, arrow piercing its shoulder; the goatman stumbled and fell into a bone-strewn pit with a splash.

Gorg roared and sprang forward; Gobol followed, hammering through two others. Sinew ripped, bones splintered. The remaining goatmen scattered, bleating in panic—or rage.

One, separate from the mass, staggered forward with a guttural snort. Gorg's axe punctured its side. It fell to its knees in a pool of its own blood and coughing bile.

Yvanna grabbed it by the arm just before it slipped into darkness of the forest. The creature wheezed, eyes rolling. "If it speaks, hold it."

Folga pressed her palm over its chest. "Speak."

It let out a broken bleat, blood bubbling from its lips. "Nn…ss… 'Bind… curse… sword…'" Then a final gasp submerged it into silence.

They backed away as the creature lay still, eyes glazing.

Gobol wiped his blade on its ragged fur. "Not much to learn. But it knows the sword."

Gorg stared at the body. "They were bound by it… cursed by it… Perhaps something from that outpost twisted them."

Yvanna crouched beside the pit. "We can't leave their bodies like this. But burning these fences... that's a warning. Get rid of this."

Folga nodded, steady though ghostly-clouded. "We cleanse this place. Then we figure out what binds them."

Gorg exhaled slowly, eyes troubled. "Let's burn the fences, bury these poor things—and find the dead enchanter who started this."

They moved through the glade methodically: tearing down bone fences, pushing torches into plank shields, letting flames crawl up ribcage spikes. The goatmen's bones cracked and hissed under the fire as the stench of rot and magic coalesced and faded.

They worked until only the ashen remains lay around a shallow pit and silent night reclaimed the clearing.

“It's done,” Yvanna said softly, looking at the burning fence pillar. “But there's more here. Worse.”

Gorg put an arm around her shoulder. “Then we dig deeper. Morning light won’t come soon enough.”

Around them, the forest exhaled — then held its breath again.

The forest breathed a damp and breathless cold, the kind that seeped through cloaks and chainmail and settled into the bones. Ashbarrow’s trees grew older here, black-barked and twisting into high arches that blotted out the sky. What little light filtered down was drowned in fog that clung low to the ground like ghostly wool. No birdsong. No wind. Only the soft drip of condensation from thick branches, droplets falling onto the party’s necks and sleeves like the chill touch of unseen hands.

The party moved slowly. Each step fell onto a thick quilt of moss that muffled sound but pulled at their boots with a spongy weight. The silence was heavy, unnatural — no insects, no creak of tree limbs. Just the quiet rustle of clothing and the faint breathing of four figures moving in deliberate caution.

Yvanna led, eyes scanning the underbrush, her bow drawn low. She raised her hand every few steps, signaling a pause, her other hand brushing over an arrow’s feather. Behind her, Gobol moved like a dwarf-shaped stone — slow and solid — his short sword held ready. Folga clutched her staff in both hands, whispering a light detection charm to feel the flow of hidden energy, eyes wide as though reading the air itself. Gorg took the rear, massive battle axe in one hand, shield slung over his back, eyes narrowed beneath his helmet.

A crow crackled overhead, sharp and sudden. Everyone froze. They looked up but saw nothing—only a silhouette flapping away into the grey void of canopy.

Whispers broke the stillness.

“Didn’t like that sound,” Gobol muttered, voice gruff and low.

“Just a crow,” Folga whispered, though her fingers tightened around her staff.

“No such thing in a cursed wood,” Gorg grunted under his breath. “Everything means something.”

They pressed on.

Water dripped again. This time onto Yvanna’s neck. She flinched. “Feels like blood,” she murmured, brushing it away.

The path ahead narrowed, flanked by trees whose bark bulged like swollen flesh. Claw marks slashed one trunk—a spiral gouged deep into the side, oozing sap that smelled like spoiled wine.

“Look,” Folga whispered. “Markings.”

The party halted. Yvanna crouched low beside the spiral, fingertips hovering over the cuts. “Fresh,” she whispered. “Hours ago, not days.”

The moss gave way briefly to bare stone — flat, black rock partially unearthed. Strange patterns were carved into it, buried under soil. They stepped around it, each cautious not to disturb the etched symbols.

The silence returned.

Then, from somewhere deep, a soft whisper. Not wind. Not voice. Something between.

Yvanna turned slowly. “We’re not alone.”

Gorg nodded. “Never were.”

They moved on. One step at a time. Eyes watching every branch, every flicker of shadow. Behind them, the dripping never stopped. And all the while, the forest listened.

After a few hours sneaking in the forest they arrived at a collapsed cave entrance beneath a glade. The party descended into underground burrows. The air grew stale and fetid—each breath thick with the reek of decay. Tunnels yawned ahead, groaning under centuries of shifting earth. Bones and fragments of elven armor lay strewn like discarded toys: shattered bracers, bent vambrils, the broken cheek-piece of a warhelm.

They passed deeper until they came to a massive pit. In its center lay dozens upon dozens of elven skeletons, each chained together by sinuous vines, impaled on crude wooden stakes. The bodies were stripped bare, ribs gnawed into splintered stakes. Their positioning showed no reverence—this was no ritual; this was murder and feeding, pure and monstrous.

Yvanna crouched by the pit, the torchlight glinting off bone and vine. "They didn’t die honorably," she whispered. "They were slaughtered like beasts."

Gorg’s jaw clenched, and Folga stepped forward, examining a piece of rotten leather still clinging to a skeleton. “And this belonged to one of them,” she said, pulling free a brittle scrap of parchment. Carefully unfolding it, she nodded at Yvanna, who read in a low voice.

“*My dearest Auriel,*
Last night, the winds carried sounds not of birds, but distant snarls—and cries, muffled, beyond our gate. First a patrol vanished, leaving only torn cloaks and a single boot. Rumors spread like a fever: shapes slipping through the glade, darker and faster than any wolf. We kept watch, but then the night fell into utter madness.
We heard shrieks, then a pounding at the gate. We rushed to man the walls only to see…

nothing. Yet the trees trembled, and I felt claws rake through the night. When dawn came, two watchmen were missing—drained, their blood gone, yet no bodies.
By the third night, fear had hollowed us. The youngest began to speak to shadows: 'They wait in the roots... watching.' A few hours later, he dragged himself into the courtyard, eyes gone white and singing in a voice not his own.
This morning, half the garrison was gone. Those left stare at the pits, hearing voices in their veins. I... I don't trust these walls anymore.
If I do not return to you, remember me not for fear, but for a heart that stood at watch when all else fled.
—Elenas, sentry, Fort Tel'Faryn."

Yvanna's voice trembled as she finished. "Sounds. Fear. Madness. They were broken long before they were killed."

Gobol smashed a fist into his palm. "They didn't deserve this."

Gorg crouched, axe-tip brushing the pit's edge. "And whoever did this… they'll bleed for it. We'll clear this place."

Folga nodded, voice firm. "First we honour them. Then, we follow their blood. We learn what lives beneath."

They extinguished their torches, packed silently, and stepped back into the tunnel's half-light —no longer searching for ritual, but for justice in the darkness.

Folga's voice lingered in the damp air of the rotten caverns: "These creatures… they aren't new. They lived here long before the elves—even humans. When the forest fell silent, they reclaimed their lair."

Gorg nodded, axe gleaming faintly. "Then they've made it their own for too long. Time for fire."

They forged deeper into the tunnels, torches lit high to crack back the shadows. Roots thickened into flesh-like veils. A stench of rot seeped from hidden cracks. Suddenly, the tunnel wall convulsed: wood splintered, stone cracked—and a Gravemaw Skulker emerged. Its skull was shriveled, robes hung from its shoulders, scarred with smeared red symbols. Two more followed, their claws slicing through darkness.

Before they could react, others slithered from diverging chambers, eight in all—each drooling with hunger, their bones creaking like broken armor. The party leapt into action.

Gorg met the first Skulker head-on, swinging his axe in a brutal arc that sheared through the creature's skeletal jaw. Bone splintered, rotted dust flew. The beast collapsed as Gorg spun around to block another lunge.

Gobol moved beside him, sword flashing, catching a second Skulker across the collarbone—ricocheting through spinal vertebra with a resonant crack. Roaring, he pushed forward, shield smashing ribs, cleaving bone.

Yvanna twisted down a narrow off-shoot. She notched two arrows, firing through the skulls of two advancing Skulkers. Pure, sharp whistles of metal, and both beasts halted—arrows buried in their braincases. She dashed forward with daggers, severing the tendons of legs impaled in air.

Folga stood near the back, chanting in an ancient tongue. Her hands glowed with silvery light. With a sweeping gesture, she unleashed a wave of sacred energy. Four Skulkers recoiled, shattering robes and chilling bone. But one staggered toward her, its jaw agape. She braced, raised holy water—and flung it over its torso. The flesh-steeped robes hissed, steaming, and the creature's spine cracked. It collapsed.

But the remaining Skulkers attacked in desperation. One sank bony claws into Gorg’s shoulder—he roared and ripped the creature’s arm free, crushing it beneath his boot. Gobol parried a swing and thrusted his blade into its chest, vaporizing bones with a final hiss.

Yvanna darted between swinging claws, slashing at a creature’s exposed skull when a vine-root grabbed her ankle—slamming her down. One Skulker lunged, but Gorg threw his axe and struck it square in the back, killing it instantly. Gobol lifted her to her feet; she spat dirt and nodded.

With the last Skulker down, silence returned—only the drip of water and their ragged breaths.

They emerged back into the bone-fenced glade. Gorg ignited branches to spread fire across the shallow pit, incinerating remains of carrion and stakes. Gobol stacked the bone palisades, sending torches through them with bright, cleansing flames. Crackles and hisses echoed as marrow boiled and vines curled into ashes.

Yvanna scattered holy water in a circle, whispering a blessing to ward off return. Folga placed her hands on the charred earth, her mana weaving a silent seal.

Gorg surveyed the ruins. “They don’t speak. They don’t plan. They feed and hide. That’s all.”

Yvanna nodded firmly. “We seal this. Tomorrow, we collapse the tunnel entrance. No one’s digging in again.”

Folga closed her book. “Let their hunger starve.”

Gobol rubbed his arms. “Let’s hope no others remain.”

As the last of the lair burned behind them, the forest’s silence felt lighter—no longer watched by beastborn eyes, but cleansed by fire and purpose. The party collapsed the tunnel entrance. Then they spotted some more goat feet tracks going deeper into the forest. They followed the tracks for multiple hours.

They trudged through the woods, scorched and strengthened, their vow unspoken but firm: the forgotten hunger would reclaim the dark—only if they failed to hold the line.

Soon they arrived near an old grove.

Moonlight struggled to pierce the thick canopy above, casting silvery mottles on the forest floor of the dark grove. Ancient oaks stood tall and still, their branches heavy with black moss. The air tasted of damp earth and decay, thick enough to taste with every breath. A carpet of fallen needles muffled footsteps, while cold mist coiled around the party’s legs, clinging to armor and cloak.

In the center, partially hidden by overgrown ferns, was a stone altar polished by rain and time. Carved into its surface were somber elven faces—eyes serene as if watching eternity—but they were defiled with deep cracks and blasphemous handprints, darkened with blood and red ritual paint. Stone steps led up from the leaf-strewn ground, slick with moss and lichen.

Surrounding the altar, a half-circle of goatmen knelt before a single figure. This Gravemaw Skulker was cloaked in a robe streaked with dried crimson runes carved long ago into a tapestry of bone-white cloth. Its skull-like face tilted upward, eyeless sockets focused on the altar as it chanted, voice low and gravelly. The goatmen’s knees were sunk into the moss, watching with submissive reverence—some cradling bits of gore-stained relics.

From their vantage point—hidden behind dense, low-lying bushes—the party watched in tense stillness. Fingers curled around weapon hilts. Every breath felt too loud.

The Skulker raised its bony hand toward the altar and spoke in an old language so ancient even Folga’s lips trembled as they recognized fragments:

“*Ama Varithal, écir-tol khen rænoth,*
Phar ul’kai vagris, ashen møl sereh.

Na feroth élan, khur'kul avan dour,
Skath-Mor gârud, phal ain dor."

It paused, and each goatman murmured the final phrase in rusty unison:

"*Skath-Mor gârud, phal ain dor***.**"

The Skulker continued, voice rising:

"*Thul-einar veklor, hornas thray morta,*
Bleed the old pact, awaken ash-born wrath,
For blood must feed, and bone must stand
Before the moon's hunger steals the land."

With each guttural verse, the goatmen leaned further, as if drawn into some ancient covenant. The moonlight caught the paint along their foreheads, causing the red runes to glimmer in the gloom.

The air stung with magic and malice. Branches creaked. The mist swallowed the chanting voices, yet their echoes lingered long after the Skulker fell silent.

Yvanna exhaled slowly, stepping back into the shadows.
"They're worshipping some ancient curse," she rasped.

Gorg tightened his grip around his axe, voice low. "We stop this now."

Gobol placed a steadying hand on her shoulder. "Carefully. We wait for a sign."

Folga's eyes reflected the altar's defiled faces. "Whatever they call—Skath-Mor, ash-born wrath—it feeds on blood and bone. We must break this circle."

In the hush that followed, the Skulker raised its arms again, and the goatmen's heads snaked upward, all attention on the altar. The party watched—a living line, coiled like a spring—waiting for the right moment to strike. Then – Yvanna stepped on a branch – crack.

The Skulker's chanting fell silent just before the forest erupted in movement. With broken roars, the goatmen surged forward, leaping from the ground as if pulled by invisible strings. The party struck as one—Gorg charging with a bellow, axe swinging in deadly arcs; Gobol at his side, shield up, sword flashing.

The Skulker raised its arms and vomited a jet of thick black water. It hissed in ancient elven: "Vienthor, sar elenoth!" Each word cracked through the air like shattered bone, distorting magic. Folga's spell flared and sputtered; her words fractured. Shadows darkened the clearing.

Yvanna's axe and dagger cut between ribs, but she staggered back from the acidic ooze that hissed along her arm. Gobol struck a goatman down, then another swung a bone-crusted mace—Gobol blocked just in time, green blood spattering.

The Skulker chanted again in the fractured tongue: “Fara ben eledor…” and a wave of dissonance shattered any holy wards Folga had laid.

Gorg met blades with goatmen, each strike ringing through the grove. One goatman collapsed, impaled on the stalwart trunk of the altar, blood sizzling in moonlight. Another fell to Yvanna’s flurry of blades.

As the last goatman fell, the forest fell quiet—but for the rasping breaths of the survivors and the Skulker’s final roar of defiance.

Gorg lunged and split the Skulker in two. It collapsed, robes drenched in black ichor, and the chanting died.

Then, from the trees, a whisper of movement. Four party members reached weapons—bow drawn, blades raised—toward the undergrowth.

Standing there was the druid they’d met before. Once moss-crowned and open-faced, he now stared with hollow eyes under pale, ash-streaked skin. He stepped forward in silence, cloak drawn tight. He tapped a knot in a massive oak trunk—it swung inward, revealing a hidden door carved of bark and lichen.

Without a word, he stepped through. The door closed behind him with an echoing creak.

Gorg’s chest tightened. “What in the name...” he whispered.

Yvanna said nothing but broke into a sprint toward the oak, boots silent on moss. Gobol and Folga followed close behind. They pushed open the door and found themselves inside the living heart of the tree—a vaulted chamber of thick roots and pulsing wood. A spiral staircase carved from bark and ancient stone descended into darkness.

Folga held her staff aloft, eyes wide. “This… is not natural.”

Gobol grunted, raising his torch. “We follow. He has answers.”

They descended together, each step creaking like a pulse underfoot, into the depths of Ashbarrow and the secrets it yielded.

They descended further until the staircase opened into a vast underground cave. The air was thick with rot and ash, fallen petals mingling with splintered bone. Bioluminescent fungus flickered over gnarled root-walls. At the center lay the Ashbane Broadqueen: a massive horror, fused from a skull, beetle-shell, and horned crown. Her many limbs clicked as she writhed, exoskeleton slick with resinous blood. Her roar shook fungus from above, and she spat black poison that pooled across the stone floor, steaming where it landed.

“Spread out!” Gorg bellowed, charging forward with axe raised. Gobol followed, blade flashing. Yvanna took high ground, shooting precision arrows at pulsating chinks between her armored plates. Folga chanted under her breath, hands glowing with pale light, forging a ward to protect Gorg as he outflanked the Broodqueen.

From the walls, roots like pale serpents thrust forward, lashing at Gobol—he braced and swung, severing them with a spray of dark sap. The roots retracted, replaced by skeletons bound in vines that creaked forward, old elven corpses animated against their will. Yvanna dropped down, twin daggers carving through brittle bone, each thrust severing vine-strangled fingers.

The Broadqueen retreated toward the hive-core—a glowing mass of spores and fungal tissue at the cave's heart. She screeched in an unholy language that Welled from the walls, and the rancid mist thickened, turning the air sour and choking.

Gobol swung hard, burying his sword in beetle-shell. It cracked like thunder—but the Broadqueen responded, pincers snapping down on his arm. He screamed, cleaving upward through her resinous hide and tearing free.

Gorg leapt beside the core, axe swinging in brutal arcs. Folga joined him, chanting a cleansing spell that pulsed outward in a wave of silver that struck the hive-core's surface. The temple of spores trembled.

Yvanna's arrow struck the Broadqueen's horn with a precise crack. She roared again, staggering back, her limbs twitching violently. With a final roar of defiance, Folga's cleansing wave struck the hive-core full. It fractured with a deafening crack. The chamber shook. Roots recoiled as if struck. The Broadqueen convulsed, spraying resin that vaporized in the silver light, then collapsed. Her scream echoed in the chamber until it ended in silence.

Suddenly, the fungal nest ignited—vines, spores, and bones cracking into flame. As the fire consumed the rotting mass, the heat unveiled a sealed stone door set flush into the earthen floor.

Yvanna whispered, eyes wide. “Look… a door.”

Gobol grunted through ragged breaths. “And what lies beyond?”

Gorg stepped forward, hand resting on his axe. “Only one way to find out.”

Folga closed her book, her eyes reflecting the firelight and the door’s ominous presence. “Let’s see what the roots were protecting.”

They formed a loose protective circle, weapons ready, as they moved toward the sealed stone door—knowing whatever lay beyond was the source of Ashbarrow’s corruption.

Beyond the sealed stone door lay a silence deeper than the grave. The party descended into a an underground tunnel that opened into a cave of boggy waters.

At first, nothing moved. Then, ripples formed across the black water, spreading outward like a silent alarm. From the mire rose ten figures—tall and broad, arms hung with swamp moss. Their heads where goat skulls, great curling antlers wrapped in black ivy. Their backs bulged with moss and fungal blooms, glistening wet in the moonlight that barely reached this place.

These were the Mirebound Eidolons—ruined guardians of a druidic order long lost. They neither breathed nor blinked. Judgement radiated from them like heat. They stood in a half-ring, forming a wall between the party and a central stone plinth once used for ritual sacrifice.

The Eidolons made no sound. No battle cry. No threat. They simply raised their root-wrapped arms, and the bog itself responded.

Gorg whispered, tightening his grip. “These things… they’re not of life.”

“They’re worse,” Folga said softly. “They were once of balance. Now they feed on guilt.”

As if triggered, one Eidolon charged—its movement impossibly fast despite its rotted form. A mossy limb lashed out like a vine-tipped hammer, striking Gobol across the chest and throwing him back into the muck with a sickening crunch.

Yvanna fired an arrow that splintered against barklike skin. She dodged sideways as another Eidolon lurched from the water, spraying her with leeches and algae.

Gorg met one in the center, battleaxe cleaving into its midsection—but instead of blood, black water and ghostly spores hissed into the air. The Eidolon’s antlers sparked briefly with energy. It grabbed Gorg’s shoulder and whispered in a language older than trees—his vision blurred with memories not his own. Screams of a long-dead druid, betrayal, fire in the grove. He roared and broke the grip, severing the arm with a savage slash.

Folga raised her book and called upon light. A burst of silver flame seared three Eidolons—but they recoiled not in pain, only in delay. Their forms smoked but kept moving, cold and precise. One summoned tendrils of peat that lashed her legs, dragging her toward the mire. Gobol crawled from the muck and charged, blade sinking into the back of the Eidolon pulling her. It released her with a gargled hiss.

Yvanna threw oil into the bog, lighting it with a flaming arrow. The fire spread across the surface, forcing the Eidolons toward land. Three stepped through the flame without slowing, skin blackening, their antlers crackling with dying light.

The battle turned savage. Roots lashed like whips. Antlers gored through chainmail. Gorg took two blows that shattered his shield. Gobol nearly drowned as one tried to push him beneath the water. Folga collapsed to her knees, casting fire with trembling hands. Yvanna landed a dagger between the bones of a skull, and the Eidolon exploded into mist.

One by one, they fell—returning to peat and bone. No scream. No blood. Just silence.

A sudden drop in temperature clutched at their bones—breath turned to mist, and the hairs on their necks stood tall.

Then, from the shadowy tunnel carved into the cave wall behind them—the same passage twisted in bone and root through which the fetid mist had once crept—came the slow, deliberate steps of the druid. No longer the kindly guide of moss and bark, he emerged crowned in woven thorns and vines soaked with dew and decay. His robes, once soft green, now clung to his form in shades of clotted crimson and mulch-black, as though he had crawled through a slaughter.

He stepped forward with unnatural calm, his bare feet touching the wet stone as if it welcomed him. The weight of his presence pressed down like old guilt, and when he spoke, it was not with breath, but with the susurrus of wind through forgotten leaves.

The druid's gaze swept across them—Gorg with blood still wet on his axe, Folga breathing hard through her chants, Gobol bruised but unbroken, and Yvanna with eyes narrowed, bow half-drawn. A slow smile curled beneath the crown of thorns.

"I am Vareth," he said, voice like wind through hollow bark. "Last of the Hollow Pact. The forest’s grief is my marrow. Its rot, my breath. You’ve wandered through its wounds—do you not wonder who bled them open?"

Gorg stepped forward, axe lowered but steady. "We fought monsters. Goatmen, skulkers, cursed dead. We didn't come to defile—we came to purge."

Vareth chuckled without warmth. "You came with fire. With blades. You purged only what threatened your path. But it was I who called them forth—the Gravemaws who sleep beneath root and bone, the goat-kin born of blight and oath. I fed them the forgotten. The unwanted. They are the judgment the world refused."

Folga's voice trembled with fury. "You raised the Eidolons. Twisted guardians once sacred into weapons of guilt."

"They were never sacred," Vareth hissed. "They were abandoned, just as we druids were. As the ash thickened, men came—your men—to fell trees, poison streams, gut the hills. You fight in the name of order, but order has no roots. It grows only walls."

Gobol spat blood to the side. "You think we're the enemy because we're not barefoot in the mud? We never harmed this land."

"You are harm," Vareth whispered, stepping closer. "You serve kingdoms of stone and steel. You cut trails where animals once wandered. You take. And take. And now you bring your fire here—to the last breath of the wild."

Yvanna stood tall, her voice low and sharp. "We didn't kill this forest. But you—you've drowned it in grief and blood. You're no guardian. Just another mad priest of rot."

Vareth's thorned crown seemed less menacing as he sighed softly and stepped aside. "No conflict tonight," he said quietly. "Let me tell you who the druids of Ashbarrow truly are."

He walked slowly with the party above ground again. Vareth closed his eyes. "I have lived here eight centuries. Born to the Circle of Greenwood saplings—where every child learned to speak with birch and ash. We tended the forest like kin: planting acorns in spring, cleansing streams of silt, guiding elk through safe paths."

He gestured gently to the trees. "These woods were once vast enough to touch the dawn sky. The druidic order served as its lungs and memory. We woke to the birdsong, kept rituals at the ancient groves—root circles carved in stone, dedicated to healing and oath. We balanced birth and decay in equal measure."

Yvanna folded her arms. "So you weren't always a mad hermit?"

Vareth's pale lips curved. "We were keepers of sanctity. When tree fell, we healed the scar. When animal died out of season, we mourned them as kin. We taught the elk calf to avoid north-roaming wolves. We sang to the deer, blessing them in fawn's first steps."

Gobol shifted closer. "What of the Gravemaws and goatmen you summoned?"

"They were Burdened Ones—creatures that wandered from the deep earth, born of rot and stone. Once, we guided them to offer thanks for mortality. We shared our bread and set them to guard tunnels of hidden springs. But centuries of neglect turned their loyalty to hunger. And when I, unable to hear the forest's shriek, failed them… they starved. Hungry for purpose, they fed on the unbidden—that's when I called them home."

Folga leaned forward. "And the Eidolons you awakened?"

Vareth's eyes glimmered with memory. "They are the final ward—the ancient guardians from before the elves built temples here. When the great Oak King fell, his spirit remained.

Bound to the peat, he stood sentinel through centuries. I brought him forth to judge those who would fence the forest, dam the rivers, fell the elders. In that moment… it was the only voice left."

Gorg said quietly, "You've lived longer than any kingdom's memory."

Vareth nodded. "I am their last remnant." He brushed a hand over the altar's moss. "With each war, each kingdom's greed, my heart cracked. I tried guidance. I begged them to tread gently. When that failed… I sought balance where none remained." He looked hard at them. "Your blind battles wounded me. But I am not your enemy."

Yvanna lowered her bow. "Then why judge us so harshly?"

"Because I saw in your blades the same hunger that felled the ancient oaks. But you proved you know restraint, mercy. That is more than most of your kind."

Silence stretched between the five of them, broken only by distant drip of water.

Vareth took a step forward, voice softening. "Let me show you the old ways now—teach you that this forest is not your battlefield. Learn, and you may yet be its allies."

He extended a hand, knuckles lined with bark like skin. And under the rotting leaves and moonlight, the party realized the druid offered not vengeance, but knowledge.

Vareth drew a deep breath, the icy air rattling through the cavern, and continued. "The Ashbarrow Circle was founded in the Age Before Memory. Centuries before kingdoms rose, druids walked these woods with no names—only the sound of the wind in their ears. We built no temples, for the forest *was* our sanctum."

Yvanna, seated upon a mossy root, asked quietly, "What did you *do*, day to day?"

"First, we listened," Vareth replied. "Listen to the pulse of the earth, the murmur of streams, the silence after a storm. We tended young saplings in sacred circles, binding their roots with herbs to strengthen their growth. We set up wildlife corridors, clearing underbrush to allow deer to pass during calving season. We harvested fallen wood only for winter fires, never wounded a living trunk."

Gorg frowned, brushing ash from his axe. "And when passers-by harmed what you protected?"

"We called them aside," Vareth said, voice softening. "Sat them in circle with us, offering pine tea as we spoke of life, of roots and rebirth. Many listened—they laid down their axes. Some never returned, choosing instead to root themselves in the forest. The rest… found paths elsewhere." He cast his gaze over the stump of an old tree beyond the stone circle.

Gobol spoke up, curiosity bright in his battered eyes. "But how do you *bind* a root to strength? Teach me."

Vareth smiled faintly and pointed to the ground. "See this seedling—a young birch. We plant it with intent: four knots in the soil, marking the seasons. In spring, we offer water from a nameless glen. In summer, we praise the green. In autumn, we inscribe a blessing on its bark. In winter, we rest against it, guarding its sleep. With each turn of the wheel, the tree grows not just in height—but in purpose."

Folga, scrolling through her spellbook, asked, "Is this where the gravemaws once swelled in purpose?"

"Yes," Vareth replied, eyes shadowed. "I led them into hidden caverns to guard my seedlings. At first, they did not understand. But with ritual they learned protection. When I failed to feed them, they went hungry—for flesh, for life. That hunger twisted them into what you faced."

Yvanna leaned forward. "And the goatmen?"

"They are drift – lost souls of forest wanderers, twisted by ceremony and hunger," he said. "Once, I gave them communion. I tried to teach them merit and grace. When that collapsed, they became predators."

Gorg spoke, deep voice echoing in the hollow space. "If you forsook them, how do you redeem now?"

Vareth knelt and touched the damp earth. "By restoring balance. By teaching that death is not an end, but a thread. That a forest must yield seed to survive. That death *provides*, but so must life."

He paused, gazing at the party. "You carry scars—physical and otherwise. I can tell you carry a faint burden of regret. That burden... is not poison. It is soil. Let us bury it, cultivate something new."

Silence settled over the stone circle, the only sound the distant drip of water and the party's waiting breaths.

"The Ashbarrow ways are not for destruction or conquest," Vareth continued. "They are for guardianship, for weaving life from death. I offer you the chance to learn this—for your wounds—and perhaps, for this forest's wounds too."

Vareth's voice softened as he gestured toward the living tendrils crawling along the cavern floor. "Let me tell you how we honored the living earth."

He knelt beside a puddle of clear water, cupped a handful, and offered it to them. "This is Ashborn spring—flows beneath our feet. We take only what we need, and always bless what we borrow."

Folga touched the water and then looked toward Vareth. "You speak of balance, but death has run wild here. How do you restore it?"

Vareth closed his eyes, voice echoing softly. “By tending the wounded. Where poison spilled, I sowed healing herbs: moonleaf for the damaged roots, dawnpetal for poisoned waters. I called back the fawns, fattened them on fresh grass. I coaxed the mycelium network to weave the earth back into health.”

Gobol crouched, picking up a small stone coated in green. “So even here—under the bog—you healed.”

“Yes,” Vareth replied. “I walked where few dared. I planted living wards in swamp and stone. But each wound I closed, another opened—an unseen sickening crept into the Rift. I thought the forest could save itself.”

Yvanna, voice low, asked, “What changed? What made you summon goatmen and skulkers?”

He inhaled slowly, voice heavy. “When the human wars came to Ashbarrow’s edge—when timber mills felled ancient groves—my heart cracked. I begged kings to stop. They offered gold instead. I tried ritual counsel. They brought axes. No circle, no ceremony could dissuade them.”

He rose, gaze distant. “I turned to the Gravemaws—they were kind once. I fed them fallen carcasses, the bodies of broken beasts, to ease their hunger. They sheltered the forest’s wounded. But hunger persisted. They became violent, as I feared.”

Gorg swallowed hard. “You wanted to protect the forest. But you chose death and fear.”

Vareth nodded, voice bare. “I chose what I believed I could control. And lost everything—the living, the dead, who were meant to be sisters. The Eidolons… they returned only when all hope was gone. I called them to cleanse the land… but they judged not only the invaders, but those who stood against them without purity.”

Folga spoke gently, “We did not cut every tree. We fought to stop famine, pestilence, graves—and worse. You say we are violators, but we also pulled the filth from the roots.”

Vareth knelt beside her. “Perhaps you are different. Wilted but unbroken. I have punished too many with my silence. Perhaps punishment is not what is needed—but planting.”

He pressed his staff into the ground. Strange flowers and mushrooms glowed around it—channelling life around destruction. “Let me teach you the rites of renewal. You’ve steadied the sword; now learn to steady the seed.”

Gorg stepped forward and knelt, touching the staff. “You have shown us roots deeper than any war. Teach us the way of the grove.”

Vareth inclined his head, a rare warmth in his gaze. “You will walk it, but not under my command. Take this staff when the time is right—when you stand ready to heal, not to punish.”

Yvanna sheathed her bow and placed a hand on the staff. “I will learn to see in moonlight too—not only the mark of blade, but the bloom of green in decay.”

Folga closed her eyes and whispered a prayer into the damp night. “History is seed and root, brother. I will carry this lesson into every spell I cast.” She reached and shook the druid’s hand. “Thank you, Vareth.”

Gobol stood, voice rough but quiet. “I’ll lay traps no more—not for food, but for shepherding paths. The forest deserves that.”

Vareth nodded, looking each in the eye. “Then let your paths diverge, but always return—with seed and with honor, as guardians of the living wood.”

He laid his hand on Gorg’s shoulder. “May your blades defend when necessary, but may your hearts seek healing first.”

The pale glow from the fungus and flowers brightened until the entire grove pulsed with life. Vareth closed his eyes and murmured an ancient phrase—the circle sealed, the wards activated.

A shaft of moonlight plunged through a crack in the stone above, illuminating the staff and the circle. Then, quietly, Vareth stepped back.

“Go now,” he said. “Let the forest heal. And in its healing, so may you.”

With that, he turned and walked away, stepping through the bark door of the tree. The hidden door of bark and root closed softly behind him—leaving the staff before the party as a symbol of accord. Folga picked up the staff and carried it with her.

The journey out of Ashbarrow passed in quiet reflection. When Gobol spoke of his village of Ashbarrow—the decision was unanimous. The journey out of Ashbarrow Forest was a slow exhale, a release from the clinging damp and whispering trees. Morning mist peeled back in silvery veils as they walked, dew clinging to boots and cloaks, the forest floor soft beneath their steps. Gradually, the oppressive canopy gave way to rising light, trees thinning into scattered copses and bramble-choked meadows. Birdsong returned with hesitant notes, and a breeze carried the scent of fresh earth rather than rot. As they crested a low ridge, the land unfurled before them—wide, rolling fields of late-summer gold, stirred by wind and broken only by the neat patchwork of farmland. Smoke curled from stone chimneys beyond, and red-roofed cottages nestled in the arms of orchard groves. The road dipped gently toward Ashbarrow Village, quiet and unassuming, framed by a world that had long forgotten the horrors whispering just beyond the trees.

The village stretched along a gentle river, water glinting silver as it tumbled over a moss-lined watermill. Reed-thatched wooden houses sat low and sturdy, their walls darkened by age and smoke. Fields of wheat rippled in the breeze, oxen and mules moving lazily between rows. Farmers in coarse tunics bent under baskets, cutting sheaves or collecting apples and

pears beneath orchard trees laden with fruit. The air smelled of fresh grain, ripe fruit, and the gentle hum of village life.

Gobol led the way to his childhood home—a small timber cottage with creeping ivy and flowering window boxes. Inside, worn benches and a stone hearth made it feel warm before the fire even cracked. They shook the dust from their boots, and Gorg stretched, arms high.

“A proper home,” Gorg said softly. “Feels good.”

Gobol nodded, leading them next door to borrow some ale. He returned with a jug of thick, dark local brew—rich, earthy, with a hint of smoked barley.

He opened it at the table. “Drink?” he offered, pouring for each of them. The ale carried the taste of hearthfire and stubborn earth, warming their throats.

“I’ll fetch tobacco,” Gobol added, heading toward a barn stacked with drying leaves. He returned with a pouch of cured tobacco and his old clay pipe—dark and cracked around the rim. He packed it, struck a flint, and inhaled deeply. Smoke curled around him, and he exhaled a contented sigh.

The party settled in. Folga leaned against a thick beam, rubbing her sore shoulder. Yvanna opened a window to let in the sun and the faint scent of pears.

“So,” Gobol began, voice slow with relief, “this is where I grew up. Used to play along the river, catch trout with my pa.”

Gorg grinned. “I’d follow you, little brother.”

Gobol puffed, slow. “Pa made me practice sword swings on trees. I hated it then—brown sap spatter on my boots—but it kept me safe.”

Yvanna laughed. “Better than armor.”

Folga smiled, exhaustion in her eyes. “What about the village? How did everyone… survive while you were off fighting with us?”

Gobol’s voice grew quiet. “They pray at the old stone marker past the mill—tribute to the forest’s guard. Since the rites failed, they feared Ashbarrow’s curse. But they survived, kept planting, kept practicing kindness. Harvests were lean—this year’s wheat nearly failed—but kindness filled their granaries.”

He looked out the window. “That’s their miracle, I think. Not sacrifice or armaments.”

Yvanna reached out, laying a hand on his arm. “They’ve got something stronger.”

Gorg nodded, voice soft. “They remind us why we fight—not just for bounty, but for the roots beneath our feet.”

They passed the afternoon sharing stories: Yvanna’s childhood thievery in Greenshore orchards, Folga teaching forest magic to aspiring villagers by moonlight, Gorg’s days as a farmhand in Bogwater. Laughter echoed off the cottage walls.

As dusk settled, Gobol tapped ash from his pipe onto the floor. “It’s been too long since I've felt peace.”

Folga laid her hand on his. “These days will keep us healed.”

Gorg raised his jug. “To home—no matter where we rest our heads.”

They toasted, and the warmth of village life settled over them. For a few days, the sounds of waterwheels, cattle lowing, and village laughter were their world. In that little cottage in Ashbarrow, they let the roots grow strong again.

King Rugimund IV sat alone in the high throne-room of Karnath’s Reach, midnight oil burning low at his side. The grand hall lay bare and still, the flickering torchlight carving his pale shadow long across polished marble. The Sword of Mirovend—legendary blade of the first king—rested across his lap. Its ancient runic glow pulsed faintly against his thigh.

He closed his eyes. In the hush, he remembered how Gorg had returned the sword, how its steel had seemed to hum with power, calling him back to birthright and unity. He traced the faint veins in the blade with his fingertips—the echo of his ancestor Mirovend, slayer of Valathron the Dragon, whose marriage to Leda had forged Brecklands and Zarothia into a single realm. He had read the ancient histories: seven children ruling seven provinces, a mighty dynasty upheld by service to the people. And here was the sword—a relic of that pact reborn.

At first, the whispers were subtle. “Glory… unity… fire…” he heard them in his dreams, voices low and insistent. They spoke of reclaiming broken provinces, of returning to the age of Mirovend’s wars and righteous conquest. He awakened each morning with a cold stir in his chest—like steel pressed just beneath the skin.

Late that night, he reached beneath his mantle and touched the hilt again. He thought of Regent Alden, steady and cautious, always whispering that war-weary provinces needed healing, not another king’s banner. He thought of Lady Mircella’s claim in the Vantell vineyards, a beacon of hope for peace. He thought of the Delmores’ fractured hold, still smarting from recent tragedies in the wine-tarnished court.

The blade pulsed once more. In his mind it said, “They hesitate. You know what unity requires.”

His jaw tightened. The coldness crept in, first toward old allies, then toward trade envoys, then toward even his own council. He realized, with a shock of dread, that the blade did not ask for war—it demanded it. The realm would see the whispers as prophecy, destiny. But inside him, a voice—a softer, older voice—asked: At what cost?

Rugimund rose and paced before the throne, robe whispering on stone. He saw, in the torchlight, his own reflection in the sword’s polished surface: a king shaped by lineage, ambition, devotion. He wanted to live up to that legacy, to bring the Brecklands and Zarothia back into greatness—not in fire and blood, but in order and prosperity.

But the blade called him to swagger and pride. The whispers had begun.

He closed his eyes again and envisioned Mirovend—dragon-slayer, unifier, man of service. He had wielded the sword not just to conquer, but to preserve. He had upheld a covenant between king and people. That was the bargain.

Rugimund sheathed the blade softly. The whisper faded—though the chill remained, like a memory of war. He placed his hand on the throne’s armrest and said, not to advisers or armies, but to himself:

“I will remember your lineage. I will choose service, not blood. Let destiny be my guide, not the sword.”

He whispered it aloud into the empty hall. Karnath’s Reach answered only with the scrape of distant rats.

But the sword’s hum continued beneath the throne.

Meanwhile in Ashbarrow village the kitchen filled with the scent of sizzling fish, fresh potatoes, garden greens, and cinnamon-laced apple pie. Yvanna peeled the last potato while Folga stirred herbs into the pan. Gobol’s neighbor, old Marta, a broad-shouldered human woman, arrived with a bent basket and a grin.

“Fresh trout from the river,” Marta announced, placing the fish on the table. She also handed Gobol a sack of plump potatoes, her eyes warm with neighborly pride. “Thought you’d appreciate a proper meal, after all you’ve done.”

Folga squeezed Gobol’s shoulder. “We appreciate it dearly.” She slid the potatoes into boiling water and arranged a fresh apple pie on a wooden board.

Yvanna lifted a flute tucked beside the hearth, readying it for later. “Let’s eat—before we’re too hungry to celebrate.” She passed bowls to her companions.

Gorg took the first bite of fish, cheeks momentarily still in repose. “Now this is a feast,” he declared around a mouthful.

Gobol poured ale into mugs, raising his in salute. “To home, to rest, and to this fine company!”

They ate with gusto—the flaky fish, creamy potatoes, crisp greens all vanishing within minutes. Folga spooned out apple pie, its steam mingling with the ale’s head. Gorg groaned in delight. “Best pie I’ve tasted since I was knee-high!”

Gobol reappeared at the door, winking. He dragged in a small wooden barrel of dark local ale, polished off its head and set it on the table.

“More ale!” he called, unveiling an even bigger cask behind him. The room filled with cheers.

Soon, Yvanna raised her flute to her lips. She began a lilting melody of Greenshore hills, echoing through the cottage. Gorg stomped in time on the wooden floor, adding hearty “ho-ho-hmm-ho’s” to Yvanna’s tune. Folga spun in place, arms outstretched, caught in reminiscence of forest dances.

One by one, villagers—dwarves, elves, halflings—filed through the door, bringing tambourines, fiddles, hand-drums. As the jug emptied and ale flowed freely, a crowd of twenty gathered. Faces brightened when Yvanna finished her song; one halfling with red curls started a jig, and laughter erupted.

“Join us!” Gorg roared, hoisting his mug. “Stomp the floor with me!”

A burly dwarf with a braided beard grabbed Gorg’s arm. They stomped in time, sending clear rhythms across the floorboards. Elves twirled around them, skirts flaring, lantern light dancing on their hair.

Gobol lit his pipe again, nodding approval. “This—this is what we fight for.”

Folga raised her mug to the crowd. “To new roots, to healing—may this forest, and this cottage, hold peace for ages.”

They all cheered. Drums and fiddles began anew; voices rose in chorus, dancing feet tread celebration into the night. Ale cups were refilled, plates wiped clean, voices soared with joy and relief and laughter.

Outside, the river murmured its own accompaniment, waterwheel turning in darkness. Inside the cottage, life stirred bright and warm—their home, for now, a beacon of hope and fellowship after long trials.

By firelight and lantern glow, the party and villagers spilled outside Gobol's cottage into the small courtyard. Laughter and conversations mingled with music, and the night bloomed like a festival amid the simple wooden homes.

A dwarf with a braided beard swung a heavy burlap bag filled with wheat, lined with lead at the bottom—his prize contribution for the evening. A mule, placid and low-voiced, stood tied nearby. One by one, villagers took turns tossing the bag as far as they could, aiming to land it on the mule's back. Cheers and hoots rose whenever someone succeeded—or spectacularly failed.

Gobol snorted amusement as he lost his throw to the mule's gentle kick, the bag sailing past its rump with a thunk. "Mule's smarter than me tonight!"

A halfling stumbled forward, flushed with ale, cheeks red as cherries. He edged closer to the mule and waved his arms. "Stupid mule! Step aside—I'm better than you!" The mule raised a hoof, delivering a sharp kick—thwack!—to the halfling's side, knocking him unconcious.

Nearby, a young farmer offered Gorg a plate piled with venison-stuffed dumplings. "Try one, hero of Ashbarrow—cooked by my sister, no less!"

Gorg took a bite and closed his eyes with satisfaction. "You may marry her."

The farmer flushed but laughed, rubbing his beard. "That's the second marriage offer I've witnessed tonight!"

At the riverside, a group of elves and halflings stripped down to jump in. They dove into the cold water with playful shrieks, splashing each other and drawing cheers from the crowd. Yvanna laughed and joined in, flicking water at Gobol and Gorg, who hovered on the bank with mugs in hand.

"Come on in!" she called. "It's invigorating!"

"Too cold!" Gobol declared, but he and Gorg both tossed a wheat bag into the river—watching it bob away under the moonlight.

A halfling with a fiddle began another tune, and couples danced in pairs. One dwarf tripped over his own boots and landed in the arms of an elf maiden, both spinning to laughter as they steadied themselves.

Folga raised her mug to a group of villagers and told a joke about a buzzard falling asleep mid-flight—and the crowd roared in response, slapping tables and benches in delight. Laughing, they returned with banter of their own: jokes about squirrels stealing apples, about the miller's crooked eyepatch that was really just a charm, and about village gossip that had the bartender's daughter engaged to a traveling bard who could only play three tunes.

At one point, Gobol took a gentle bow. "You all heal my bones and my heart."

Yvanna slid beside a farmer, teasing: "Next time let me toss the bag—I've got aim."

The farmer winked. "Then I'll marry her too!"

Cheers and laughter broke out again, echoing across the sleeping village.

As the moon moved into its zenith, ale jugs emptied and bellies filled. The party raised one final cheer—for peace, for fellowship, for the simple joy found in dancing feet, shared stories, and good company.

And as the music spun out under the stars, the people of Ashbarrow danced their cares away—one muddy, merry step after another.

The day dawned crisp and bright as Gobol stepped into his cottage courtyard. A pair of villagers—a miller named Jaen and his brother Falin—waited for him.

"We've got the new grinding stone," Jaen said, wiping dew from his brow. "It'll fit the mill perfectly, but it's heavy. We could use muscle."

Gobol grinned at his companions, still sluggish from the recent revelry. "Well, men, time to work off those ales."

Soon, they guided the stone—nearly a meter across and carved smooth by the village stonemason—onto a sturdy wagon. Four mules were hitched to its tongue. Gobol pressed down; Gorg heaved at the iron handles. With straps and sweat, they secured the stone.

The mules pulled the wagon slowly down the dirt road toward the watermill, Clan River weaving alongside. Onlookers nodded approval as the wagon rumbled by.

Arriving at the mill, the grist building loomed tall—stone walls, timber frame, massive water wheel visible through open slats. Jaen traced the grinding stone's place on the axle housing.

"First, we remove the old stone," Jaen explained. Inside, shafts and gears groaned as they lifted the wheel and pried the worn millstone loose. Gobol and Gorg gripped its edge and dragged the cracked stone to the edge of the floor—a mile of effort packed into each footstep—until it clattered outside.

By midmorning, sweat drenched their shirts. Gorg lowered the new stone in place with careful alignment. The axle groaned under its weight, but it held. They secured it with bolts and wedges.

“Now the wooden blades,” Jaen said. A small door swung open above the wheel. Inside, they removed split paddles, pulling them down to replace with fresh oaken boards. The blades were cut to fit, tapered for water flow. Gorg and Gobol hammered them into place, sealing gaps with tar to prevent leaks.

By midday, the water wheel was back in position, creaking at first but once the miller opened the sluice gate, the wheel caught the current and revolved—slowly, then faster—sending power through the gears with a satisfying rumble.

“There,” Falin said, beaming. “Almost done—just the grain load.”

Jaen led them to a shed piled with sack after sack of wheat grain. Two hundred kilograms or more. Gobol and Gorg grabbed sacks, hunching under the weight and heaving them toward the mill’s hopper. Yvanna and Folga strained to lift a single sack between them.

“Come on,” Folga whined, “this is too much.”

“You’re weak,” Gorg taunted, swinging a sack onto the hopper. “This is no job for weak womenkind, eh?” He set the bag down. Yvanna’s cheeks flushed.

“Men are built for this,” Gobol added, chest heaving. “We’re here so you don’t have to!”

Yvanna glared. “Fine. Watch me lift one bag.” She hoisted it halfway before stumbling. Folga dropped hers with a sigh. “That’s enough,” she said, turning away.

As afternoon turned to evening, sacks dwindled at the shed and rose within the mill. Each swing of heavy grain shook their shoulders, but by the last bag, the miller nodded with pride.

“You’ve done more in a day than we managed in weeks,” Jaen said, offering them mugs of ale.

Sweat-slick and aching, Gobol and Gorg clanked mugs. “To heavy lifting and harder work,” Gobol toasted.

Yvanna and Folga butted elbows, both nursing sore muscles—not from blades against shadows, but from plain old labor.

Gorg laughed, handing each of them an ale. “Alright, now that—” he gestured at them “—“weak womenkind” have hired themselves out for farm work, I think we earned one more break.”

They drank with weary, satisfied smiles. The village mill had spun again, and with it, the bonds of home and hard work.

The next week, Vicar Gorl arrived at Gobol’s cottage, hood pulled low. He sat, hands trembling in his lap.

“Thank you for seeing me,” he began, voice tight. “I’m worried for a little girl—Amanda, only ten. She’s changed… something dark has taken hold.”

Gorg frowned. “What’s wrong with her?”

Gorl swallowed. “She’s aggressive—spitting curses, throwing objects. Last night… she threw me across the room. I was unconscious.”

Yvanna stood. “That must have been recent.”

Gorl looked at the floor. “A few days ago her parents noticed tremors—rage like nothing seen in human children. She bit off her father’s ear, cursed him in a voice… like not her own.”

Folga closed her eyes. “We’ll investigate, Vicar. Where is she now?”

Gorl wiped sweat from his brow. “At home. The room upstairs. I tried blessing the house, but she howls at my words.”

They climbed the creaking stairs to the girl’s home. Doors along the dim hallway opened into emptiness—until they reached Amanda’s door. It groaned as they pushed it open. Inside, dark drapes swallowed the corners. Moonlight barely touched the center of the room.

Amanda lay on her back across a narrow bed, trembling. Her breath rasped, almost inhuman. She stared at the ceiling with wide, unfocused eyes. Leather toys lay strewn about; a chair lay overturned. From somewhere behind the bed came a soft, ominous creaking—like wood shifting under pressure.

Yvanna’s hand tightened on her bow. “Stay quiet,” she whispered. They stepped in silently—until Folga raised her voice.

She opened her spellbook and recited in a clear, strong voice:

“O Lux Aeterna, veritas filia,
In lumine tuo libera animam hanc—
Sedans turbam, exstingue maledicta,
Ad pacem ducis tenebras.”

Her tone remained soft but firm. Amanda’s breathing faltered. The creaking stopped.

Gorg took a steadying breath. “We’re not here to hurt you, Amanda.”

Amanda’s head snapped toward them. For a moment, she was just a frightened child. Then her body tensed again, eyes narrowing with sudden madness.

Gobol took a careful step forward. “Easy, girl. We want to help—no harm.”

But she screamed, a primal war-thrush of rage. Her hand shot out, hurling a wooden block at him with shocking strength. It slammed into the wall behind him, splintering wood.

Yvanna dropped to one knee. “Folga—again!”

Folga began chanting again, this time with palms pressed toward Amanda:

“Exorcismus adjunctus, lux invocetur,
Mente purga, spiritus vagus abeas in pace,
In nomine mundi, in nomine vitae—
Clama fortitudinem, Amor vincat umbras.”

Small motes of golden light drifted from Folga’s fingers toward Amanda. For a minute, the girl’s body slackened. Her dark aura dimmed, and she cried out—not in rage, but in pain and fear.

Gorl stepped forward, tears in his eyes. “I know this child. She’s good. Something has taken root here.”

Folga lowered her voice to Amanda: “We’re here to help. You’re not alone.”

Amanda’s shoulders shuddered with sobs. The violent tremor in her limbs faded, replaced by exhaustion and confusion.

Folga turned to the party. “She’s not herself—but she fought off the prayers.”

Gorg exchanged a look with Gobol. “Whatever’s hurting her—it’s strong. Not natural.”

Yvanna nodded. “We’ll stay tonight. Guard her. Find the source.”

The vicar knelt beside Amanda’s bed, holding her hand. “Thank you—thank all of you.”

Folga laid her spellbook shut. “We begin in the morning. Tonight, we guard.”

They closed the door softly behind them—silent sentries in a house shaken by a child’s darkness—ready for the battle they never expected to fight.

The morning light filtered weakly through the curtains as Folga knelt beside Amanda’s bed. Her voice was steady, laden with compassion and holy intent.

“O Lux Aeterna, pura lux vitae…” she intoned, her hands glimmering. A spray of golden light burst into the girl’s chest. Amanda screamed in agony, writhing beneath the sheets. Her small body convulsed, legs flinging wildly.

Yvanna’s gaze sharpened with alarm. “What is happening?!”

From Amanda’s throat came a rasping cough. The bed shook. After moments that dragged like years, the girl arched upward—eyes wild—and a pale, translucent figure began to press forth from her mouth: a Wraith, its form warped and swirling with necrotic shadows.

“Lords of the holy worm, what in the gods’ name is going on?!” Yvanna cried, drawing her dagger.

Gorg moved to shield Amanda, lifting his axe—but before he could strike, the Wraith whipped toward him. The impact was brutal - Gorg was thrown across the room with a sickening thud, his armor dented. A wave of necrotic energy radiated in a deep, wobbling bass that vibrated bone and equipment, slamming the rest of the party off their feet.

Yvanna hit the wall with a gasp; Gobol, behind her, slammed into furniture. Folga landed heavily but scrambled to her feet. The Wraith drifted across the room to Vicar Gorl, its movement unnatural and predatory. Gorl stepped forward, raising a prayer—but the Wraith tore him down with inhuman strength.

With a crushing yank, the Wraith ripped Gorl's head from his shoulders. And then—unfathomably—it hurled it through the air. It struck the wall with a gruesome thud. Gorl's body collapsed as blood pooled onto the floorboards.

Amanda, free from its grasp, shrank beneath the bed, sobbing with terror.

Yvanna knelt beside the girl to comfort her. "It's okay. Stay down—stay away from it."

Gobol roared and raged from his feet despite the pain. He lumbered forward and struck the Wraith with his sword. The blade passed through the entity yet forced it back, its form flickering.

Folga regained focus. She raised her staff, channeling surge of radiant energy. "By light, I banish thee!"

Her words coalesced in a burst: radiant blades of pure light sliced into the Wraith. It shrieked—an echo of horrific sorrow—and ghostly limbs lashed at the walls.

Gorg staggered to his feet, wiping blood from his lip. He raised his axe—imbued with the cleansing ritual—and dove into the Wraith's void form. Sparks flared as steel hit... nothing solid—but his intent shattered the entity's hold in slow motion.

Yvanna circled, backing while slicing the wraith with dagger in quick arcs. "We won't let it take another innocent soul!"

The Wraith thrashed wildly, but weakened under the combined assault. Gobol drove his sword through its chest area. The spirit wailed and recoiled. Folga's staff cast a ring of light around the entity. The room brightened as its form began to unravel. Gorg charged in and struck merciful blow—steel met ectoplasm, and the Wraith shattered in a cascade of cold, pale sparks.

It dissolved into a puddle of silvery ichor that evaporated slowly in the first full glimmer of daylight reaching the floor.

Silence followed—shaking, tremulous, weighted with grief. Amanda remained huddled beneath the bed, tears falling down her cheeks.

Gorg closed the distance slowly and replaced his axe in its sheath. His voice was low: "Isiah… Father Gorl… we're sorry."

Yvanna knelt beside Amanda. Her voice murmured. "You did what you had to do, brave girl. It's over."

Folga rushed to the girl, tears in her eyes. "It's safe now. No more evil."

Amanda peeked from the bed. “I—I’m sorry. I didn’t—mean it.”

Gobol rested a hand on her shoulder. “You had no choice. Darkness owns nothing but lies.”

Gorg surveyed the room: broken furniture, blood-stained boards, the priest’s body, the Wraith’s residue. He exhaled slowly. “Let’s tend to Amanda—and then give Gorl a proper burial.”

Silence hung in the room, fractured only by quiet sobs and distant sunlight trembling on wood.

They regrouped around Amanda—careful, protective, resolute. The battle for rescue had been brutal, but they had won. Tonight, they would watch over her. And tomorrow—they would pursue the evil that had brought this shadow into a child’s life.

The party, joined by several villagers, gathered at the small cemetery by the old stone wall. In hushed sorrow, they laid Vicar Gorl’s body to rest beneath a simple wooden cross. A soft breeze lifted the burial ribbons as the village elder murmured a prayer. Pale gravestones stood silent in the twilight.

Once interred, they returned to Gobol’s cottage. Gorg paced under the fading sun. “It started with Amanda. Now we lose the village priest. The evil’s close.”

Yvanna leaned forward. “That wraith—it’s connected to something strong, something twisted.”

An elderly villager, Brianna, spoke up through trembling hands. “Artha... She lives in that old house by the ravine’s edge. Rarely seen. I don’t like it. She even looks like a bad omen.”

Another neighbor nodded. “She’s secretive. Keeps to herself.”

Gorg exchanged a glance with the others. “Then we go to Artha’s house. See what she knows.”

They walked under lantern-light to the ramshackle cottage at the ravine’s rim. Its walls sagged, windows dark. Yvanna rapped sharply on the door. “Artha? We mean no harm—we seek answers.”

Silence. Raps continued, then gentle protest from Gorg: “Artha, answer!” Yvanna called again.

No reply. Gorg sighed, then rapped again. Finally, rolling his shoulder forward, he kicked the door. The wood snapped open with a cry of despair.

A putrid smell hit them like rot. They stepped inside.

In the center of the room lay Artha on her back, eyes closed—pallid, lifeless. Nearby was a half-eaten animal carcass rotting. A thick ring of dried blood encircled it, scorched by tallow

candles laid on the floorboards. The candle flames had long since died, leaving wax dripped into pools of reddish-brown residue.

Folga crossed herself. “A ritual took place here. Definitely dark magic.”

Yvanna gently pried Artha’s fingers—cold. “Looks like she died during the ceremony.”

Gobol sniffed the air. “Rot and restraint. Poison? Or curse spill?”

Gorg crouched beside the blood ring. “She summoned something. Maybe a wraith, or spirit—but got consumed instead.”

Yvanna’s voice grew soft. “She may not have meant harm. It could have gone wrong.”

Folga knelt and gently brushed the stray animal bones. “It’s grief—anger—broken oath. The same root as Amanda’s possession.”

Gorg rose, face tense. “Then this is the place it started. Artha opened the door.”

Yvanna straightened her back and drew her bow. “We take what we can—ritual residue, candle stubs—for analysis by Folga’s light.”

Folga placed her hands on the ritual ground and whispered a cleansing prayer, dim motes of silver drifting across blood-stained boards.

Yvanna and Folga gathered ashes and candle pieces into small cloths. Gorg kept watch, axe ready.

Gorg kicked at Artha’s corpse, muttering grimly, “Dead as dead—shall we bury you?” His boot struck her rib, but instead of crumbling, Artha’s eyes snapped open, milky and full of death's hunger. A moan rasped through the cottage as she launched herself at him.

Yvanna ducked back, but Artha’s fist smashed her into the wall behind her. She slumped, unconscious before she hit the floor. Gobol surged forward to check her, while Gorg spun to face the undead woman.

Artha snarled, her lips rotted and drawn back over yellow teeth. She ripped at Gorg’s soft armor around his ribs, claws tearing flesh; blood poured as she sank in deep. Gorg howled and swung his axe, but her strength was unnatural—his blow was parried as if against bone. She shoved him back against a broken table, splintering wood across his armor.

Folga gasped as Artha lunged straight at her, jaws open. The stench of rot hit Folga like a strike—her breath caught in an involuntary gasp. Artha’s teeth sunk into Folga’s cheek, mossy tendrils tangling her hair. Folga screamed, hands rising to pry her off. Gobol leapt forward, ripping Artha back. “Leave her be, you plague!”

Artha flailed, smacking Gobol into a cupboard. Furniture toppled, crockery shattered. A pane of glass cracked in the window as Artha beat against it in a rage of savage claws.

Gorg staggered to his feet, blood dripping through his armor. He hoisted his axe, chanting through gnashed teeth: “For Gorl, for Amanda—and for every soul you’ve tainted!”

Artha snarled again, lunging. Gorg swung high with heavy force. The blade gouged into her skull, splitting it open with a sickening crunch. Bone splintered and dripped, but Artha’s eyes stayed lit with haunting intelligence—she remained upright, unabated.

Folga found her voice and recited a spell of binding:

“O tenebrae flectant,
Lux arcanae dominent,
Spiritus inferni recessus,
Fera persona restituatur.”

A shimmering cuff of silver and green light encircled Artha. She howled in agony, body convulsing as magical vines of destiny twisted around her. The binding slowed her movement, giving the party a precious moment.

Gobol seized that moment, charging and burying his sword in her thigh. She screamed, stumbling backward, clutching wounds through decay-ridden flesh. Gorg followed with another swing, cleaving through shoulder and vine, but still her arm flailed in resistance.

Folga intensified the spell, bolstering the vines. Artha staggered back, boots scraping boards, a heavy gasp as moss and bark fell from her hair.

Gorg roared, “Now!” He and Gobol lunged together. Gorg’s axe struck her chest; Gobol plunged his sword upward. Artha’s body swayed, torn between life and death. With a final hideous shriek, she collapsed in a heap of broken bones and sodden robes.

The cottage lay still. It took moments for the party to realize the silence was final. Yvanna stirred; Folga helped her to sit. Gorg knelt and felt the corpse’s body—no heartbeat, no twitching.

He exhaled slowly, looking at the massacre around them: splintered pews, toppled tables, the shattered window letting in morning light.

Gorg stood, clearing blood from his axe blade. “She’s dead—undead now rests again.”

Yvanna wavered, holding her head. “Too strong. Too… wrong.”

Folga placed a weak hand against the wall and whispered a prayer of release for Artha’s soul.

The party moved cautiously through Artha’s cottage, determined to ensure no more evil lurked within. Upstairs, they searched by lantern light. Folga opened a battered wooden chest revealing old, faded books with strange symbols and archaic rituals. In the corner lay delicate dresses—Artha’s from softer days—spattered with age and dust. A mirror on the wall was cracked, its glass dimmed with grime. Animal skulls—fox, crow, even some small deer—were arranged on a shelf, pinned with rusty nails.

Yvanna stepped back from the eerie tableau. “She studied… some dark lore.”
Gorg examined the books. “Maybe she tried reversing the curse. Maybe too late.”

In the kitchen they found a pot of decayed stew, mold crawling on its surface. Unwashed dishes lay stacked with crusted remains, and bones he'd not seen before cluttered a corner. The stench made Gobol shake his head. “She wasn’t careful with death.”

They descended creaking wooden stairs into the cellar. Folga held a torch that sputtered in the darkness. She lit sconces along the walls, casting plumes of yellow flame against the stone.

From the shadows around them, six wraiths emerged—pale shapes that drifted above the ground, their forms gaunt and cloaked in darkness.

“By light… steel…” Folga muttered, drawing mana from her belt in a glowing stream.

The wraiths advanced. Gorg met the first and swung his axe, only for it to pass through fleshless form. A moment later, a wraith slashed his cheek—long and deep. Blood spattered across stone as his vision blurred.

“Damn you creatures of dark!” Gobol roared, charging, sword sweeping through two wraiths. He gasped when one wrapped cold fingers around his ribs, crushing him against the wall with crushing force.

Yvanna backed into a corner, drawing arrows from her quiver and setting them alight. She fired multiple flaming arrows—each burst of orange against the wraiths' roiling forms—but they merely shrieked and flickered, weakened but not destroyed.

Folga advanced, staff high, shouting a prayer. Mana burst forth; beams struck two wraiths, sending them shrieking into decayed dust. Another swooped to grab her ankle, but she swatted it away with glowing force.

Gorg staggered at the center, face bloodied and vision spotted red. He slumped unconscious onto cold stone.

Gobol roared, swinging wide and brutal. He cleaved one wraith apart. A second snagged him by the shoulder; he staggered with a cry of pain, still swinging.

At that moment, villagers—eight of them—burrowed down the stairs, swords drawn. "We heard the sounds!" one yelled.

They rushed in, slashing and hacking at the wraiths. Two villagers fell quickly—disemboweled on dark blades. Another collapsed after a limb was wrenched off, limp at Gobol's feet. The wraiths tore heads from two more. Only four villagers remained, striking with ferocity born of desperation.

Folga knelt beside Gorg and closed his bleeding wound with a soothing light—he gasped back to consciousness.
"Fight!" he rasped, rising slowly.

Together, the party and remaining villagers pressed the attack. Yvanna planted arrows in wraith skulls as Gobol swept in, taking advantage of openings. Gorg, blade in hand, drove holy steel into the last wraith. With a final mournful shriek, it dissolved.

Silence fell.

In the flickering torchlight, bodies lay scattered—humans and spirits entangled. Only bruises and blood told of their suffering.

Yvanna sank to her knees, trembling. "They… they saved us."

Gobol gently lifted the injured bodies. "We thank them with every breath."

Gorg stood over the carnage, hand on his axe. "Artha's curse … is deeper than one ritual."

Folga knelt beside the fallen villagers. She murmured passages to guide their souls. When finished, she stood. "We must cleanse this house—and bury these brave people." she said softly.

They carried the bodies reverently to the clearing beyond the village's old cherry trees. The earth was soft, the grass worn where generations had gathered for mourning. They laid Artha and the brave villagers side by side—each with a small wooden cross carved by the local

carpenter—then covered them with dirt. At their heads, Gobol drifted incense smoke as villagers prayed in quiet union.

Later, back in Gobol's cottage, the fire had long gone cold. Gorg stood in the center of the room, voice low and taut.

"Can't you feel it… this… that when you start thinking something is good… evil emerges from somewhere… it is everywhere… I can't," he said, voice cracking with exhaustion.

Folga's eyes glistened. She crossed to him and touched his arm. "You must remain strong. You are the main force of our party." Her voice shook. "We need you."

Gobol, who had left the door slowly but overheard, stepped closer, voice soft but firm. "That is true, Gorg. I feel it too. Every time this happens, it's as if some dark force is watching us—waiting for us to falter."

Gorg sank to his knees on the wooden floor. "I… I don't know if I can fight it again."

Yvanna appeared at the entrance with a damp cloth. She knelt beside him, lightly brushing blood and dirt from his face. "You have," she suggested, gentle but sure. "We—stand with you. Always."

Gorg closed his eyes, breathing heavily. Folga gave him a steady look and took his hand. Gobol knelt at his other side. Yvanna stood behind them.

They formed a circle and bowed their heads. Folga began what became a prayer of unyielding light. The others echoed softly, voices growing stronger as they went on:

Folga (softly at first):
"O Light eternal, source of hope and healing,
Guide our hearts through shadowed trial.
As steel is tempered in flame, so are our souls tempered in adversity.
Show us the path when darkness gathers around us."

All (in deliberate whisper):
"Guide our hearts through shadowed trial."

Folga:
"When the land seems broken and grief lays thick upon us,
Let not despair take root.
Grant us the courage to hold the line,
To persevere in the face of horrors we cannot yet name."

All:
"Let not despair take root."

Folga:
"May the memories of those we lost transform into seeds of renewal,

May their spirits dwell in peace beyond the forest's sorrow,
And may we stand as warriors of the flame, not flame-bringers of death."

All:
"May their spirits dwell in peace... stand as warriors of the flame."

Folga:
"Bind our strength in unity—our wills in justice—and our hearts in compassion.
When evil seeks our fear, let us rise in defiance.
When doubt breaks our resolve, let us stand upon one another.
When the night stretches long, may dawn find us hope-laden and steadfast."

All:
"When evil seeks our fear… let us rise in defiance… dawn find us steadfast."

Folga (voice ringing):
"In the name of life, in the name of balance, in the name of light unfading—
Let us be the living testament to what is good in this world."

All (with growing conviction):
"In the name of life… light unfading—let us be the testament to what is good."

They remained kneeling long afterward in the hushed room. No grand fanfare—only the silent solidarity of four souls, bonded by suffering, hope, and the promise that as long as they drew breath, they would resist the darkness together. The party rested for a week longer in Gobols house, eating, drinking and sleeping. Soon they made a plan to start moving towards Ironmarch Keep in the west. They packed some packs some food - dried meat, some apples and pears, waterskins of ale, bread and sets out in early morning.

The rain thrashed upon them like liquid steel the moment they left the shelter of Gobol's cottage. The countryside around Ashbarrow had turned to a river of mud, agricultural fields turned to morass, and the footpath to Ironmarch Keep became a quagmire of soaking wet earth. They sloshed forward half-blinded by sheets of rain, footing lost with every step.

Gorg cursed in a roar that was swallowed immediately by thunder. "Damn this bloody rain! The track's like a muddy puddle!" He struggled with each stride, boots sinking to the ankles in soupy ground. His clothes clung to him with the weight of water, and every gust of wind drove sharp chills into his bones.

Folga stumbled and went down, face-first into thick mire. Her staff clattered as she fell, and she coughed violently, froth flecking at her lips as she inhaled rainwater. Yvanna knelt instantly beside her, half-shielding her with a cloak as she helped her rise. Folga's hair was matted with clay, and her robes adhered to her trembling frame. She gagged, drenched, but Yvanna guided her upright, pressing blankets to her shivering form.

Gobol charged ahead with an enthusiastic shout, only to fall into a deep depression buried beneath the rain. He thudded into the pit, mud spraying in all directions as he attempted to

climb out. The water rose to his waist before Gorg heaved him free. Gobol stood sopping and grinning despite the grime. “Well, that was a surprise!”

They continued, walking as much as they could in lines where the track was firmer, but rains carried ruts into flooded sections. Everywhere they turned their boots sank—some too deep to pull free without assistance.

A sudden dart of rust-orange caught their eyes: a fox, spraddled across the path, front legs caught in slick mud. It struggled silently, its coat weighed down, wide eyes frantic. Yvanna knelt again. “Here you go, poor little fellow,” she murmured, and gently pried the animal free. It shook off the worst of the clinging sludge, then limped into the reeds beside the path.

Lightning cracked across the sky in brilliant streaks that lit the soaked forest beyond. The thunder rattled their ribs in response. Black clouds churned overhead and the rain’s rhythm never wavered—relentless and near-painful in its intensity.

Every few steps required assistance. Gorg helped Gobol across a deep puddle. Gobol supported Folga as she slipped at every footfall, knees sinking and arms flailing. Yvanna scouted ahead, pointing out sections of track that offered firmer ground or hidden roots that could serve as stepping stones beneath the water.

Despite the misery, they forged on. Ale in their waterskins was thick with muddy sediment, but they drained it anyways. They munched on dried meat and half-soggy bread whenever they paused, grateful at least for the warmth of food in their bellies. By evening, all of their clothes were dripping, their muscles protesting every move, but they made camp in a damp hollow beneath a fallen oak. The rain ceased only slightly, enough to change into a steady mist.

They huddled together against leaking tents, mud caking their boots even after they removed them. Gobol blew on his boots in vain. Gorg cursed the keep’s distance outside the tent, as if it mocked their exhaustion. Folga stared out into the gloom, wiping mud from her lips, while Yvanna pressed a blanket around her teammates against the creeping damp.

They slept fitfully, soaked and sore, comforted only by their shared hardship. The journal of this first day would be muddied boots, slippery ground, unexpected rescue, and the certainty that this road to Ironmarch Keep would test every fiber of their resolve.

Rain had finally eased into a persistent drizzle, but the sky remained a dull gunmetal gray as the party trudged forward. Gorg and Gobol fell into step together, their conversation sliding easily into lighter territory.

Gobol huffed. "I reckon rabbit meat's the easiest—lean, quick to roast over a fire. Skin’s thin, gut’s easy. Stick it on a spit, turn it slow, and it’s good.”

Gorg spared him a glance. "Fine for a quick meal. But for flavor? Nothing beats a deer haunch. Got the right fat, the right texture. Takes longer to cook, mind you. Needs a fire low, slow—so you get that crust without drying it out inside.”

Gobol nodded, wiping mud from his boots. "True. But rabbit's better for travel—you can carry ten in a pouch without ruining the smell. Deer haunch—that's for setting camp proper."

Gorg sniffed the moist air. "Works for me. Skinning's the same—cut around the ankles, pull down in a clean slip. If you start at the feet, you avoid puncturing the stomach and getting grime in the meat."

Gobol smiled, rolling the explanation forward. "Then split the hide down the spine. Use two knives if you have 'em—one to cut, one to pull. If you mess it up, you'll tear the hide and waste good pelt."

"What about pig?" Gorg asked. "Greaseier meat. Takes scrubbing bones to get right."

Gobol spat. "Pig's good if you've got time—smash the ribs, hack the shoulders. Load it with herbs, pack salt with it. Smoke's the best cure. But on the road? Too heavy. A rabbit or a pheasant is quick. A deer's a proper meal."

Gorg grunted. "I'll trade a rabbit for some rabbit stew, but I'll drool for a roast haunch with juniper berries. We'll skin them the same—just deeper cuts through ribs after butcher. But you need proper fire—green wood inside, dry sticks outside, embers forming hearth that lasts hours."

Gobol rubbed his hands together. "Leave that to Folga and Yvanna—by the time we reach Ironmarch Keep, you'll have a banquet waiting."

Behind them, Ivanna walked humming softly. A melody from rolling hills—her flute tune carried in the quiet aftermath of rain. Folga drifted beside her, humming along in harmony, fingers brushing wet leaves.

Gorg shook his head. "Those two make it seem like a carefree walk."

Gobol laughed. "They ain't lugging axes and chain mail. But even they can't ignore the smell of cooking meat on the wind."

They passed a fallen tree, and Gorg added, "When we hunt again, we do it proper—rabbit for mornings, deer for nights. And we show Yvanna the skinning, teach her from the spine out. She's got quick fingers—could learn fast."

Gobol nodded, mist rolling off his whiskers. "Aye. And she's got the eye for cooking, too. Imagine her rabbit stew after we reach the keep—flavour, spice, broth for days."

Gorg grinned. "Then that's the plan. But first, we get there, skin the game, set the fire—taste the reward."

They strode on toward Ironmarch Keep—muddy, hungry, hopeful—with the promise of game and good cooking spurring their steps beneath the clouded sky.

They trudged onward when the mist cleared to reveal a mule cart bogged down in a deep rut. As they approached, the cart jolted to a halt and the driver cracked the reins overhead.

“Evenin’,” Gorg called, wiping mud from his brow. “Need a hand?”

The man aboard the cart leaned down. He wore a wide-brimmed hat and a hopeful smile. “I’ll take that. Stuck since dawn—couldn't free her even with four hands.”

Gorg offered his booted hand. “Where’re you from?”

“Around Bogwater,” the man replied, sliding off the cart bed. “Small homestead. You look familiar, friend.”

Gorg straightened, puzzled. “I’m Gorg—Bogwater village. We might’ve crossed paths near the mill.”

The man laughed. “We’ll drink to the same sunrise yet. Typical for our lands—always muddy as a pig’s pen.”

Gorg chuckled, thumping his chest. “Grew up in Bogwater. Almost turned into a pig meself.”

He and Gobol pried at the cart wheel while Yvanna and Folga worked the harness rope till the mule pulled free with a groan of strain. The cart lurched back to solid ground and dusted off.

The woman on the cart, apron full of small sacks, offered them a dried strip. “Salted deer jerky—best for long roads. Ten silver for the bunch.”

Gobol counted coins from his pouch. “Worth every bite.”

They handed over the coins, and the party tucked bundles into their packs.

The man stirred the mule. “Got word in Ironmarch Keep… trouble’s brewing. Soldiers mutinied last week—turned on their officer, Sergeant Tramel. They’d been quartered in the outer ward, complaining of pay cuts and cruel discipline.”

“Mutiny?” Yvanna asked, eyebrows raised.

The man nodded, voice dropping. “A dozen or so set upon Tramel—caught him unarmed. They claimed he tortured recruits for sport. By moonlight, they dragged him outside, broke bones, killed him. Escaped into the wetlands before dawn.”

Folga swallowed. “Ironmarch Keep can’t stand that.”

The man shrugged, tugging the reins. “Governor’s sending a search force—but they’re stretched thin. People trust no one now.”

Gorg frowned. “We’re headed there. We’ll see what’s true.”

The cart slowly creaked forward down the packed road again as the man waved. “Good luck to you. Stay dry—mud’s the least of your worries near Ironmarch.”

The party watched it trundle away, the family waving in the gray light. Then they turned back to the trail, the salted deer jerky warm in their packs, hearts heavy with news of mutiny.

Clouds gathered overhead, and the road stretched ahead—wet, wild, and full of questions waiting to be answered at Ironmarch Keep.

The second night on the road passed quietly until the sky turned warm with sunset. Gorg stumbled with tent ropes, cursing each knot. “Why do these ropes always have a mind of their own?” he grumbled, wrestling one line until he finally stomped on it, straightening it with a neat snap.

Yvanna knelt beside a neat pile of gathered branches. “Dry sticks, good kindling—they’ll catch fast once we light the fire.” She glanced up at the thinning clouds.

Folga padded across a patch of grass, eyes scanning until she found a small ring of dryer grass. “Here. This’ll do.” She knelt and laid it gently by Yvanna’s sticks. “That’s perfect for a spark.”

Beside a shallow puddle, Folga reached into her pack and pulled out a small iron pot. “Will you draw water, Yvanna? I’ll prepare our stew.” Yvanna dipped her canteen deeper into the murky puddle until it was half full.

Folga peeled two potatoes and a carrot with a small blade, then sliced dried deer jerky into bite-size strips. She dropped them all into the pot, added a pinch of salt and a crushed wild herb from Yvanna’s pouch, stirring it carefully.

Gorg glanced over, tent tied off finally. “Looks good. You’re a better cook than I ever was warrior,” he admitted with a grunt.

The evening air warmed quietly. Birds trilled in the distance, grasshoppers began their steady chorus, and a rabbit paused by the puddle—nose twitching before it bounded off over loamy earth.

Yvanna crouched beside Gorg and whispered, “It’s peaceful.” He nodded, a rare softness in his eyes.

Gobol sat on a log, clay pipe in hand. “Let me start the fire.” He struck flint by sparks dancing onto the dried grass. Flames caught quickly, the fire springing to life as Gorg and Yvanna placed kindling and small branches over it.

Soon, the pot hung above the flicker. A light simmer began. Folga ladled small samples into wooden bowls. Smoke curled and mingled with steam.

They settled around the fire—Gorg and Folga sipping ale from waterskins with appetites sharpened by the day. Gobol took a slow puff of his pipe then passed it to Yvanna before taking another long drag.

Folga broke the silence first. “This soupy stew of deer, potatoes, carrot… it’s something else after weeks on ration bread.”

Gorg agreed between swallows. “Better than any battlefield feast. The road’s harsh—but this—this keeps us alive.”

Gobol puffed thoughtfully. “I like it best remembering home—but this makes me want to taste every bit of countryside all at once.”

Yvanna looked into the firelight. “We have some way to Ironmarch Keep—but nights like this remind me why we came.”

Gorg grunted softly. “To see it done and safe.”

Folga handed around a second bowl of stew. “Whatever awaits at that Keep—we carry hope in our bellies and warmth in our hearts.”

They ate in companionable silence as embers glowed beneath flaring stick ends. A distant owl called once, distant and watchful, then night came fully.

As goblets emptied and the stars came out, they leaned back, each wrapped in their cloaks—resting in simple peace.

Morning would bring mud and trial again. But tonight, they tasted tomorrow.

The party tramped through Ironmarch Keep’s gates, arriving in a courtyard that was little more than a pigsty. A circle of muddy swine lounged in the center, snorting with contentment. A rotten fence sagged around them, straw-strewn hay bales crumpled in a corner, and a section of the wall lay half-collapsed, beams and rubble blocking the far side. A half-drunk guard leaned on the rampart, muttering nonsense as he squinted at them; another soldier relieved himself into the courtyard’s corner without a word.

Yvanna pinched her nose. “What a place.”

They found the barracks through a dripping archway. Inside, a burly man scowled at them over a steaming bowl of greasy stew. Carrot chunks and musty documents littered the table. He glared as they entered.

Gorg shrugged and stepped forward. “We came to look for some work. If you have any.”

Guldhard, the man at the table, spat into his bowl before speaking. “Work? In this shithole? Our commander was murdered by mutineers—body dragged out back. I sat at his desk yesterday, trying to sort bloody papers. I can barely read as it is.”

Folga stepped forward politely. “We understand. Still—we’ve come far and could use a night or two’s lodging. We can help—anything you need.”

Guldhard narrowed his eyes as he chewed. “Well… damn… Suppose I can offer you a hay mattress for a night. But only if you clean the pig pen—pile of shit overflows like a mountain. Hasn’t been cleared in a year.”

Gobol cracked a grin, dropping his pack with ease. “That’s no trouble. We’ll get to it.”

Guldhard snorted, waving them out. “Get to it, then—and hurry up, or I’ll find more unpleasant tasks.”

They stepped back into the courtyard, nose-wrinkling. Gorg cracked his knuckles. “All right—shovel, pitchforks—it’s us or these pigs.”

Yvanna pulled out gloves and handed them to the others. “Let’s get this over with.”

They set to work. Gobol and Gorg pitched rotten straw and muck into a mule-drawn cart. Folga and Yvanna swept straw aside and scraped sludge from the pen walls. The pigs snuffled and squealed in confusion, occasionally rooting up fresh droppings with muddy snouts.

Gorg paused, wiping sweat and mud from his brow. “Year of neglect… this is monumental.”

Gobol grunted and raised the pitchfork. “Only way they’ll hire us—if they see we’re worth more than our blades—and also don’t mind muck.”

Yvanna sighed as she shoveled. “Makes us appreciate clean floors.”

Folga laughed softly. “And a warm bed tonight.”

As they heaved the last of the pile into the cart, Guldhard reappeared. He surveyed the cleaned pen in sour approval. “The place has never looked so tidy. Mattress is in the east barracks. You can have your food—stew again—before nightfall.”

Gorg hefted his arms. “We’ll take it.”

Gobol slapped Guldhard on the back. “Thanks. Anything you need, we've got muscle.”

Guldhard nodded and stomped away. The party watched him leave, then exchanged glances and tossed their gloves aside.

Gorg exhaled in relief. “Let’s find a bed—then maybe we clean the rest of this damned keep.”

They trudged off toward the barracks, mud-caked but accomplished—ready to earn the rest they so sorely needed.

They filed into the east wing of the barracks, mud still streaked across their armor. The beds were simple straw pallets in wooden frames, lined in a row along the stone wall. Yvanna settled onto the second one, Folga to her side, Gorg took the first—but fell asleep almost instantly, snoring faintly beneath his cloak. Gobol sat on the edge of his pallet, smoking his clay pipe, smoke curling around his head in pale rings. Folga stayed awake, reading her

spellbook by dim torchlight. Yvanna filled a basin of water and washed her hair at the foot of her bunk, the cold water dripping onto her makeshift mat.

Soon, Folga rose and padded quietly out of the room, returning with a chipped wooden bowl full of greyish stew and two spoons. Carefully, she nudged Gorg's shoulder.

"Gorg, wake up. Stew's here."

He grunted and sat up, rubbing sleep from his eyes. The others left their reading and washing to join her. They passed the bowls around, dipping in hungrily.

The stew was lukewarm and watery with floating bits of carrot and unrecognizable meat. Its taste was bland and slightly sour, but the hunger dulled their criticism. They ate in silence for a moment.

Finally, Gorg said with a grunt, "Not exactly a feast fit for a king, but it'll do."

He sighed, spooning slowly. "I doubt we'll find any good work for our trade here. Vindolanda Keep lies a few days ahead. Maybe we try our luck there. We're good on coin right now, but more never hurts."

Yvanna leaned back, tying her hair with a scrap of cloth. "You're right. Cleaning pig shit isn't exactly my bowl of soup. I'd rather be anywhere else."

Gobol drained a large gulp of ale from his waterskin. It erupted with a mighty croak, and a faint stench wafted toward Folga, who pinched her nose politely.

Gorg wiped a dribble of stew from his chin. "This place—Ironmarch Keep—it used to be a proud fortress of the southern march once. Built by the old Earl Mirius centuries back. It was meant to stand watch over the frontier roads, a bastion of peace. They used to host tournaments and feasts—soldiers in shining plate, banners snapping in the wind."

He paused, a shadow passing across his face in the firelight. "Then came the economic cuts, the frontier shifted, and the soldiers were sent away. Without discipline—and the commander killed—it's become a shell of its purpose. A ruin filled with mud and broken spears."

Yvanna nodded thoughtfully. "So it fell into ruin from neglect…and now men resent it, want to tear it down, or worse."

Gobol added, voice deep and steady, "Vindolanda Keep hears tales of its downfall. They might need us—steel and spades are welcome at that fortress. A place where soldiers still care about strength and honour."

Folga closed her spellbook. "Then Vindolanda is our next destination. Tomorrow, after we're rested, we move on."

Gorg finished the last of his stew. "Tomorrow we ride. But for now—sleep. I'll take first bed by the door—rippling mud and rat bites can wait until daylight."

Gobol reclined again, pipe forgotten.

Yvanna stood and stretched. “Tomorrow a fresh road. Tonight a few hours of peace.”

They snuffed torches, one by one, and the barracks sank into darkness save for the great snore of Gorg beginning again. They lay down—hungry, hopeful, ready for the road to Vindolanda.

The party lay in deep sleep when suddenly a tortured shout pierced the night. Gobol bolted upright, clay pipe tumbling from his grasp. He leapt from his pallet and shook the others.

“What in the gods—?” Yvanna whispered, voice low and tense. Outside, the crash of metal echoed through the keep.

Gorg snatched up his axe. “Someone’s attacking the courtyard.”

Folga closed her eyes briefly, mouth tightening. “Let’s get weapons—quiet.”

They crept into the corridor, boots whispering on cold stone. Ahead, an armored door flew open with a thunderous crack. Two dark figures—mutineers—rushed toward them, blades raised in murderous arcs.

Gobol reacted first. He charged, voice snarling, and kicked the first mutineer in the stomach with brutal force. There was a wet grunt—the man’s wind expelled—and he crashed into the wall, slumping like a ragged sack of flesh. Gobol seized the moment: he brought his sword down in a swift, decisive stroke. The blade bit into skull and bone, splitting the man’s face in two until his head drooped forward. Gobol paused, chest heaving with steel and shadow.

The second mutineer saw Folga ahead in the corridor. With savage intent, he lunged, wrapping his arms around her neck from behind. Folga gasped, struggling against his iron grip as her legs kicked out. Her staff hit the floor with a soft thud.

Yvanna, always alert, stepped forward with lightning speed. Her boot cracked against the mutineer’s shin, sending him reeling forward. He let go of Folga, staggering into the wall with a loud groan. Yvanna seized the opening—she delivered another swift kick, propelling him back into the corridor.

The mutineer sprawled, head striking a stone step behind him. Yvanna’s smile was cold as she bent over him, vaulting the menace from Folga.

“Sorry, Folga,” she whispered, almost gently. Then she twisted the man’s arm and pinned him. Without hesitation, Gobol appeared and drove his sword into the man’s stomach. A wet, horrifying rip echoed in stone, organs spilling onto the flagstones as the mutineer choked. Gobol slid his blade free, blood dripping. The man slumped into foam and expired.

Silence fell again, broken only by the distant sounds of combat in the courtyard. The party stood amid the carnage—blood pooled at their feet, breaths shaky but eyes resolute.

Gorg opened the corridor door and peered out. Moonlight fell across the courtyard, dimly illuminating bodies and flashing blades. A drunken guard lay headless near the musty pen; two battered fighters and Guldhard wielded steel against eight mutineers.

Gorg stepped into the corridor. “After them!”

Yvanna at once leveled her bow, arrow nocked. “Death to them all.”

Folga touched his shoulder lightly. “We fight together.”

Gobol spat blood. “For the keep.”

They descended into the courtyard, weapons readied, the night alight with steel, fear, and the hope of saving their fortress. The clash of the next fight erupted—blades intertwined, allies tested, and the mutineers brought their wrath.

Moonlight glinted off steel as Gorg, Gobol, Folga, Yvanna, and Guldhard plunged into the melee against eight mutineers. The air was thick with sweat, fear, and the metallic tang of blood.

A mutineer lunged at Guldhard, blade slicing in a wide arc. Guldhard staggered back, parrying desperately, sparks showering as metal collided. One of the battered fighters charged in to protect him, taking a vicious slash across the side. He stumbled, eyes wide, throat opening in a gurgle as crimson painted his tunic. He fell—no time for grief.

Gorg roared and swung his axe, crashing into a mutineer’s shoulder. The impact lifted the man off his feet, sending him sprawling into a collapsed wall. Gorg followed with a heavy stomp before spinning to face another attacker. The ground beneath him was slick, but his footing held firm.

Gobol fought with brutal efficiency. He sidestepped a stabbing blow and cut his opponent’s leg from under him. The man fell screaming, clutching at Gobol’s sword embedded in his thigh. Gobol twisted the blade, eyes cold, and drove it forward again until the man’s struggles ended.

Yvanna ran along the edge, arrow drawn and loose. She loosed two burning arrows in rapid succession—one struck a mutineer in the shoulder, igniting his sleeve, the other caught another across the chest. Flames licked at cloth as he dropped his sword to beat at the fire. Yvanna deftly kicked him away and drew her daggers for swift, clean kills.

Folga, despite her gentle spirit, was fierce in desperation. She raised her staff and shouted a command of crackling light. A burst of energy flared, searing through two mutineers as they advanced. One staggered backward, flesh blistered, and the other collapsed unconscious with smoke curling from his armor.

The mutineers fought with feral savagery—knives slashed at Gobol’s arm, carving ribbons of pain. Gorg parried an overhead swing meant for Yvanna, leaving Yvanna to stab the attacker

in the thigh. The man collapsed, fingernails clutching at stone. The courtyard floor was slippery with spilled blood.

Guldhard, though wounded, struck with unexpected vigor. He pulled his sword from a fallen mutineer's back and blocked another's strike. A second fighter joined, but as they held the line, the mutineers pressed—three against them. One mutineer drove a blade through the fighter's throat. He gasped loudly and fell into a broken shield, eyes dimming without the chance to strike back.

At that moment, Gorg stepped in. He grabbed the throat of one mutineer and slammed him against a ruined pillar, kneeing him in the gut until he crumpled. Gobol brought his sword down across another's shoulders, cleaving bone with a wet crunch. Yvanna spun through the chaos, plunging daggers in muted fury. Folga's staff unleashed another pulse of light; another mutineer slid to his knees, mouth opening in silent pain before collapsing backward.

Only one mutineer remained to confront Guldhard directly. The man lunged but Guldhard met him with a slash to the chest—then the mutineer spun and collided into Guldhard, both crashing against the courtyard wall. Gorg charged in and skewered him, finishing the fight.

Silence drenched the courtyard as the last echo of steel faded. Eight mutineers lay dead or dying; the two battered fighters were still, bleeding beside their fallen swords. Guldhard leaned heavily on his blade, legs wobbling. Blood soaked his tunic but he stood tall, eyes reflecting moonlight and pride.

Gorg wiped his axe on the leather of a mutineer's belt. "I think we… we held them."

Gobol knelt beside the dead fighters, closing their eyes in a slow, solemn gesture. "They died with courage."

Yvanna crouched next to Guldhard, pressing cloth to a deep wound in his arm. "You're alive, and that's what matters."

Folga pressed her hand to Guldhard's shoulder, offering healing prayers to staunch the bleeding. A soft glow emanated where her palm rested.

Guldhard nodded, breathing heavy. "Without you, I'd be dead as well. We owe you more than this ruined keep."

Gorg exhaled, wiping sweat and grime from his brow. "The fight's done. Let's bury these men properly—friend and foe. The Keep survives… for tonight."

They gathered the fallen in respectful silence, knowing the cost of their survival and the weight of the future that still lay ahead.

They carried the bodies of the fallen mutineers and the brave keep fighters to a freshly dug trench just outside the cracked western wall under the moonlight. No marble markers—only silent earth, shoulder to shoulder, the dead laid to rest like weary soldiers returning home. Their breath misted in the chill night as each shovel struck soil.

Guldhard spat into the open grave at the final body before the dirt settled. He turned to the party, eyes hard despite exhaustion. “You’ve done more than measure to protect this place. Now we must send riders to Vindolanda Keep. Ironmarch is unmanned—reinforcements are needed. You should go with word that help must come, or we have no protection here.”

Gorg nodded, biting his lip. “We’ll go. The people here deserve a barracks filled with defenders, not mud and corpses.”

Guldhard gave a curt nod. “Some more fighters will come on their own. But best we have someone sent from Vindolanda. The mutineer maggots are dead as ground… for now. We’re safe at the moment, but we need some more people for the keep.”

The night wind rattled in the broken gate. The group trudged back to the barracks, each step heavy and watching, nerves taut. Gorg collapsed into his pallet, candle guttering. Yvanna nestled beside him, bow still within reach. Gobol leaned against the stone, pipe muffled in his hand. Folga curled up with her spellbook, faith trembling but firm.

They lay with one eye open, adrenaline still streaming in leg veins and clenched fists. Sleep came in flickers and half-dreams.

A rooster crowed sharply across the courtyard. Bright sunlight streamed through arrow-slit windows, lighting stale dust motes in the air. The party stirred awake, bodies stiff from fatigue.

Guldhard appeared with a battered bowl each, passed with a solemn nod. They ate strips of dried deer meat slowly, all savoring the simple protein after the ordeal.

“It tastes of life,” Yvanna said softly, savoring the last chew. She took a slow sip of cold ale.

Gobol raised his own mug. “To Vindolanda Keep—may its walls stand longer and its soldiers steadier.”

Gorg exhaled slowly, folding his cloak over his shoulders. “Let’s set out while the sun’s on our backs.”

They set off down the road under clear skies. The fields of the southern fields glowed gold and green; dew-wet grass shimmered beneath the morning light. Birds trilled in the hedgerows and a mild breeze brushed across their faces.

“Feels good to walk without the clatter of steel humming in your head,” Folga murmured, eyes soft.

The road wound through gentle hills where sheep grazed lazily on hillside steeps. A distant ribbon of a stream glistened in the sun as butterflies drifted above wildflowers.

Gorg shook out his cloak. “It’s not the battlefield—but it’s still beautiful in the quiet.”

They shared stories as they walked: childhood games, favorite meals, hopes for the future. The road carried them away from Ironmarch’s darkness and toward Vindolanda’s promise.

First evening rolled in soft and warm after a day's march. They camped beside a small copse near a rushing rivulet. Birds sang as dusk deepened.

Folga lit a small fire with Yvanna's help, and pot was once again over flame—steaming stew of deer meat, potatoes, herbs, taste fresh and comforting.

They ate in companionable silence, firelight casting flickering shadows across their faces. Gobol puffed happily on his pipe as Gorg toasted with a bowl of ale. The night breeze was pleasant, carrying the scent of grass and pine.

Sleep came easily this time, the tension of battle a distant memory. Each slumbered deeply—at last at rest—for tomorrow held the road to Vindolanda and the promise of new purpose.

Vindolanda Keep

The road opened onto Vindolanda's courtyard beneath a stark mid-day sun. Here, the air felt sharp and alive. The walls stood firm, stone towers bristling with arrow slits. A wide portcullis had been lowered but left unbarred for passage, and a banner—black hand on a muted grey field—snapped in the breeze atop the central keep. Foot soldiers, some in heavy mail, others in light leather, patrolled with compact discipline—120 men strong, by the looks of them.

The party entered past vigilant guards in polished armor marked with the black-hand sigil and made their way to the barracks. Inside, a man in full plate sat behind a heavy wooden desk littered with reports and ink. He was broad-shouldered with cropped steel-grey hair, and he coldly surveyed them from beneath a heavy brow.

"State your business," he growled.

Yvanna stepped forward with calm. "We bring word of Ironmarch Keep—the mutineers have struck and been dealt with, but it is unmanned and vulnerable."

The man spat upon the stamped wooden floor. "Damn maggots," he snarled. "We should've impaled their scrawny heads on spikes at our gates."

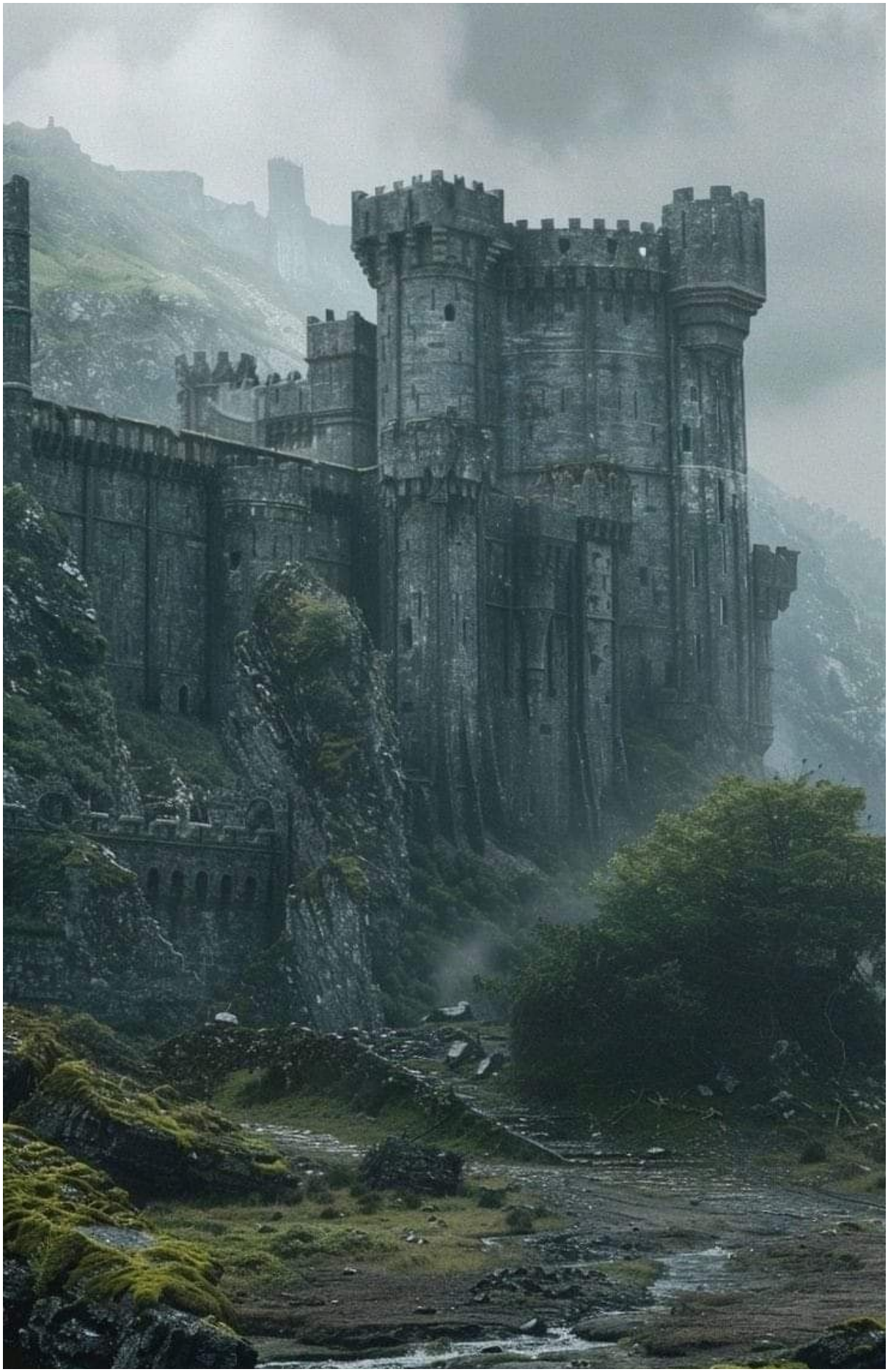
He stood in a single, fluid motion and seized a mug from a soldier nearby. "Eamon! Muster twenty men! You go to Ironmarch tonight and reclaim that place."

A guard bowed and disappeared, while the plate-armored man turned back to them.

"Name's Rowan," he said with a rough nod. "You four hauled ass for those keep fools—you did us a service. Here—your pay." He thrust a satchel heavy with gold across the desk. It clinked loudly; they counted a hundred crowns between them.

Gorg accepted it with a curt nod. "We'll put it to use."

Gobol cleared his throat. "We're ready for more work if you need us."



Rowan steepled his fingers, contemplating. “You’ve trailed well. There’s trouble in Durgath’s Hollow—a mining village a day’s march east. Miners have vanished in the shafts. No word from them in weeks, and wolves haven’t taken miners in that number. Could be

more to it. I want you to go. Investigate. Bring back living men or bones—and report back to me.”

Folga looked thoughtful. “Is there danger in the tunnels?”

Rowan’s expression hardened. “You’re riding into darkness and stone. Might be beasts, might be something older. We’ll equip you—torches, spike-hammers, rope. You leave at dawn.”

He stamped his gauntlet-clad hand on the desk. “Vindolanda supports this. We need this cleared. Are you in?”

They exchanged glances. Gorg spoke first. “We’re in.”

Yvanna folded her cloak and matched his gaze. “We’ll bring answers—or give our lives trying.”

Rowan nodded, a rare glint in his eye. “Good. Return here before noon. I’ll make sure your names are recorded in the roll as soldiers of Vindolanda.”

He leaned back. “Before that—take your time in the keep. Eat, rest, buy supplies. We march for Ironmarch tonight—but once I’ve men sent, I’ll equip you for Durgath’s mission.”

Outside, the courtyard’s crisp air felt promising. Armed guards paced on the ramparts. The black-hand flag fluttered steady as stone beneath the midday sky.

Victory had welcomed them—but a darker dawn awaited eastward in the tunnels of Durgath’s Hollow.

They marched into Rowan’s quarters at high noon, helmets tucked under arms, boots clicking on stone floors. Rowan glanced at his ledger. Yvanna stepped forward, voice clear, “We’re ready to enlist, sir.” He nodded and dipped his quill, recording each name—Gorg, Gobol, Folga, Yvanna of Greenshore—Vindolanda’s newest agents.

Soldiers hustled them to the armory. Soon they were outfitted: sturdy leather jerkin, rope, iron-bound torches, rations, and two spike-hammers heavy enough to dent bedrock. Bundles secured, they set off in organized stride toward Durgath’s Hollow, sword and torchlight rhythms echoing in time with winding paths.

The hike lasted a full day through gentle hills and forested bends. By dawn next morning, fog wreathed the mining village. They reached pick-and-shovel huts, shifting earth, creaking shacks of timber and stone.

A miner with greying beard and dirt-lined face stepped forward. “Ah, you must be the soldiers come to help,” he said, voice tight with worry. “Name’s Bula.” He led them toward

the mine entrance, pointing to cart tracks. “Last week, they broke through into a new tunnel. Four miners went in—and never came back. None dare enter. They say demons or worse lurk in the darkness. We need help finding them.”

Gorg slammed a fist into his palm. “All right. We’ll go underground and investigate. Gods above, what in the earth’s hells is going on down there?”

Folga adjusted her satchel, securing vials of light-incanting dust. “Stay close, Gorg. These tunnel junctions can go all directions. Keep torches high.”

Yvanna nodded, bow strung and ready. “We’ll support each other. Nothing unseen should harm a miner or soldier.”

Gobol grinned and hefted a spike-hammer. “Then let’s see what’s core-deep in those caverns.”

They fell in line behind Bula, torches ignited. Damp air embraced them at the entrance—earthy, heavy, and wet. The passageway narrowed until their shoulders brushed stone walls.

Bula paused at a collapsed wall that revealed the ancient tunnel beyond—wide, arched, older than the mine proper. He pointed with a gauntlet. “Here. They broke through that old shaft.”

Gorg knelt to run a gloved finger over damp stone. “This looks centuries old. And undisturbed. Let's carry on into the ancient tunnel.”

Folga checked her staff, whispering a prayer of brightness. Yvanna slung her bow. Gobol gripped his hammer. They stepped forward beneath low arches, torchlight dancing across age-worn masonry.

They entered in solemn silence—underground with purpose and courage. Awaiting them was a darkness filled with secrets.

The ancient tunnel sloped downward into darkness, the party’s torchlight dancing over slick stone walls. Ahead, twelve goblins—narrow-shouldered and gray-skinned, nostrils flared—sprang from hidden recesses. Their eyes reflected savage glee as they brandished crude blades and rusted spears.

Gorg reacted first, swinging his axe in a wide arc that splintered a goblin’s neck armor. The creature collapsed, head dangling at an odd angle. The clash had begun.

Gobol roared and charged another pack member, driving his sword into the goblin’s gut. There was a sickening squelch; bile sprayed. With a grunt, Gobol yanked free and smashed the hilt into the goblin’s skull. Bones cracked.

Yvanna backed to the corridor’s side, loosing arrows in rapid succession. One found a goblin through its throat, another drove through shoulder and pinning it to the stone wall. Her third arrow clipped a goblin’s wrist mid-attack, sending its dagger skittering away.

Folga summoned a flash of radiant energy from her staff. Two goblins burst into ash-white light, shrieking as they collapsed into smoldering dust. Their companions snarled with hatred.

Gorg pivoted to meet them, boots braced. Three goblins attacked at once—one stabs upward, another sweeps low at his knees, the third feints left. With powerful strides, Gorg intercepted the knee-swing, raising his shield. He blocked the thrust to the face with the flat of his axe, the clang ringing through the tunnel. He then cursed, swung low into the knees of one goblin, dropping it in a spray of dark ichor. He braced and crushed a shielded foot amid a hail of slashes.

Gobol swung again, rending through leather and flesh. He blocked a poisoned dagger aimed at his side and spun the attacker around with a shoulder bash—sending it tumbling down a cold stone step before slamming the sword into its back.

Yvanna dashed forward to strike a goblin that leapt toward Gobol from behind. She spun, dagger flashing, and slit the creature's throat in one clean arc.

Folga, retreating under assault, recast her radiant spell. A sphere of soft light formed around her and Yvanna, forcing three attacking goblins to flinch backward. She followed with a volley of bright missiles, forcing open a clear path. As one hazy light snapped into the last goblin's chest, it screamed and stiffened.

The dust settled. Ten goblins lay strewn across the tunnel, limbs intertwined, bodies battered and broken. Two had fled back into side passages, vanishing with shrieks echoing in the stone.

Gorg wiped sweat from his brow. "They ran," he panted, voice fierce. "They know better than to stay."

Gobol sheathed his sword. "They saw our strength and decided not to test more."

Yvanna fetched the arrows from the fallen. "We should not follow blindly. Traps may lie ahead."

Folga paled and took out a healing salve for her cuts. "But they were guarding something—these were too coordinated to be random sighting."

Gorg nodded, glancing into the tunnel's shadowed depths. "Then we move in—cautious. Twelve goblins taken—ours is the deep tunnel now."

They reignited torches, hearts still pounding. Though bruised and blooded, their unity had felled a dozen foes. Now the deeper vault called—and no goblin would stand in their way.

They turned sharply into a narrow side tunnel. Torchlight revealed a lone goblin crouched in the shadows—sallow skin, beady eyes darting, spear clutched in trembling hands.

Gobol lunged forward, seizing the goblin by the scruff. He slammed it to the ground, hammer first into its ribs. The creature whimpered, pressed against cold stone.

“Where are the miners? Answer, or die!” Gobol growled, voice echoing.

The goblin coughed, hacking blood. “No… no… master don`t kill me!” it hissed. Gobol’s hammer hovered, ready.

Gorg stepped forward. “You better make that answer worth breathing.”

The goblin trembling, spat at Gobol’s boot. Tears slid down its face. “Deep underground… miners in prison. Old stone cages. I’ll show you. They’re down past the collapsed junction—through the Ancient Hall.”

Yvanna stepped closer, dagger drawn. “Ancient Hall? Tell us more.”

The goblin gulped. “The prison was built by goblinkin over millennia. Before any surface wars. My ancestors—many tribes—dug those stone arches and cells. It held elves, dwarves, humans… even orcs. A holding place for slaves, sacrifices, beasts to break us.”

Folga lowered her staff. “Why were they imprisoned?”

Goblin swallowed again. “To honor the Earth Mother—for our tribes before we knew kingdoms. It was a holy place—cemented by blood. Those who disobeyed were made slaves. The prison’s corridors extend like webs. My kin used to hunt for escaped slaves—torture them back.”

Gorg’s brow furrowed. “So the goblins kept people there long ago—and still?”

The goblin nodded, hiccupping. “Yes. When the tribes went underground in the war, they brought miners—captured. Figures… they need workers. The prison still used, though fewer… voice-less masters. The miners dig—some escape and’re dragged back.”

Gobol pressed—hammer back. “Where’s the entrance?”

Shadow flickered in the goblin’s eyes. “Here… then ten steps, left… through arch covered with runes. Past trap door. Below, the prison chambers…”

Yvanna exchanged a look with Folga; both nodded.

Folga spoke quietly. “We’ll keep you alive, if you lead. Then you go with us—no tricks.”

The goblin scrabbled to its feet, kneeling. “Yes… yes master. No tricks. I lead… show you miners. I just want no harm.”

Gorg hefted his axe, horned helmet casting shadow. “Your word holds your life. Break it, and I break your bones.”

The goblin whimpered assent.

Gobol released his grip, stepping back. “Lead on, then. And hope your ancestors are listening—because we’ll not fall into that old trap again.”

They torches lit forward. The goblin moved first, its form small and hurrying, leaving them to follow into the unknown depths where ancient cages awaited.

The party slips through twisting tunnels, trap doors, and vaulted archways in near silence. The goblin—its small form cloaked in shadow—moves deftly ahead, guiding them past hidden pressure plates and worn loosening stones. Each step feels older than the last, walls whispering of forgotten ages.

After half an hour, the goblin halts before a low door carved with runes. From beyond come muffled, desperate screams. Gorg crouches low, trading a look with the others before easing the door open. They pass into a dim hall lit by faint, stale torchlight.

Inside, rows of rock-carved cages sealed by crude iron bars reveal living horrors. In the nearest cell, Gorg approaches, stomach twisting as he sees a gaunt figure devouring what looks like a rib—twisted by isolation, flesh bleaching white.

“Mina… die… feed,” the creature mutters, low and broken as Gorg shudders back. Folga turns away, hand pressed to her mouth.

They move on: another cell reveals a woman with only one arm, gnawing at her leg where joints show. Another—a man with both legs missing—is curled over a skeletal remains, eyes lifeless.

“What happened here?” Gorg demands of the goblin, voice low but urgent.

The goblin glances aside. “They… stayed too long. Disease from goblin warfare—spreads in blood, flesh, mind. They become Skinbreeders. Those who didn’t fall to madness were forced into mines, deeper… to work.”

Yvanna grips the bars. “They’re… not human anymore.”

Gobol’s face hardens. “These… these things—cannot be saved.”

Gorg rounds on the goblin, grabbing its neck. “Answer me—where are the miners? Are there any left alive in human form?”

The goblin’s throat whimpers, body trembling. “I—I don’t know. There are thousands. Some alive—they mine… but deeper. Past the twin shafts—beyond here.”

Gobol tightens his grip, voice low and dangerous. “Lead us there. If even one miner breathes human— we find them.”

The goblin gulping paint its fear vanishes. “I’ll show you. I… guide you. No one else must see.”

Folga steps forward, placing a hand on the goblin’s thin shoulder. “We’ll look in the mines. Anyone left— we’ll find them. If they’re lost already… we end this.”

Yvanna nods, dagger sheathed calmly. “Let’s go—quietly. We must reach the deeper shafts.”

Gorg releases the goblin's throat. "And if this is a trap— you'll wish you were a Skinbreeder."

The goblin scuttles forward, torch in hand, leading them into uncharted tunnels where the remaining miners may still hold on—human or not. Their only guide is the last of a creature who helped make this nightmare in the dark. After some time sneaking in tunnels they descended lower and came to the mine entrance.

The underground tunnels were sick with the sound of dripping water and the metallic rattle of shackled legs. Chains clinked as rows of slave-miners—humans, elves, dwarves—pushed carts on rails. Their ankles were locked in iron cuffs, hands chained in pairs, capable only of sliding picks through veins of ore. Dust and despair hung thick in the air.

Yvanna moved to one elven worker, voice hushed. "Friend, do you know of four miners missing? Tell us—what happened to them?" The elf stopped his swing, eyes distant and mouth opening and closing without sound. The reply fell like broken glass:
"Grr… mountain… dark… no light… masters hold us…" He slumped back to his work, garbled whispers trailing.

Gorg approached a human miner. The man's shoulders were slumped, eyes glazed empty.
"Brother—if I free you, will you come with us? Step into the daylight."
The miner lifted his head, voice hollow: "Inside mountains… darkness… master owns us."
He resumed shoveling ore.

Gorg sighed through clenched teeth. "They're broken."

Folga whispered, recalling faster than light. "In the village—they said the missing miners had pickaxe tattoos on their forearms." She pointed at a group of bound men. A stir of hope sparked.

Yvanna scanned until she saw one man flexing his arm—bare enough to reveal a faded pickaxe tattoo. She pulled lockpicks and knelt by his cuff. Carefully, she worked against rusted lock. With a click, the shackle opened.

"Rise—come with us," Yvanna whispered urgently.

The miner's head snapped up. "Water… air… help…" he gasped. Folga reached out and helped him to his feet: "Please, come quick—we must leave the mines."

But as he lunged forward, panic shook him. He screamed for help in raw terror. Yvanna raised her hand to quiet him, but Gorg moved faster—his fist connected softly at first, then stronger. The miner's body slumped; his cries stilled. The man lay unconscious.

Yvanna dragged another chained miner forward, whose sleeve revealed the same pickaxe tattoo. "You—you must come with us," she said, voice firm.

The miner stared at her with unseeing pupils. "Can't… can't leave…" His grip on the pickaxe tightened, muscles twitching unnaturally. Then he swung it suddenly, catching Folga across

the shoulder. The wood cracked and the blow knocked her backward—the iron haft dredging slow pain across her skin.

Gorg roared and grabbed the man, wrenching the pickaxe away. “They’re under some spell. Slavery’s deeper than steel here.”

Gobol stepped in, sword raised. “Cut his chains, Gorg—quick.”

Gorg hacked through iron chain, freeing the miner's ankles. The miner staggered and collapsed in a heap, breathing hard, but refused to rise.

Yvanna knelt by Folga, checking her wound with steady hands. “Are you okay?”

Folga nodded numbly, pale but breathing. “Just… the weight of this place.”

Gorg looked around the cavern. Rows of chained workers continued their labor—mute, broken, shadows of their former selves.

They hoisted the two chained miners between them by force—Gorg and Gobol bearing the unconscious one, Yvanna and Folga supporting the injured but conscious miner. Yvanna’s arm trembled under the strain.

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“We can’t take them all—they resist,” Gorg panted. “Let’s save at least these two.”

Gobol grunted agreement. “We move fast. No stopping.”

The goblin scurried between them, flicking its wrist ahead to help guide them. Their footsteps echoed in the rock as they retraced their route upward, the damp stone slick beneath their boots.

Some time later, ascending a narrower incline, the unconscious miner stirred. His eyes shot open, panic flooding his features.

Rattling groaned. “No—no, please—let me go!” he screamed, voice distant yet surprisingly powerful in the tunnel’s tight confines.

Gobol’s reflex was immediate: his large hand clamped down across the man’s mouth, fingers driven into his face so hard bone shifted.

“Shut up, you damn maggot!” Gorg slapped him across the stomach and shoved him forward to be carried. But his kick only startled the rest.

The miner gasped, stumbling. With his cry, eight goblins charged from hidden side passages, their wicked blades gleaming.

Yvanna released the chains with trembling hands. “Gorg, Gobol—defend them!”

The goblins attacked in coordinated fury. One lunged at the miner Yvanna bore; she placed herself between them, her dagger slashed upward—and the goblin's strike caught the chained miner's throat. A strangled cry erupted as the goblin's blade found hollow flesh—it fell away with two soldiers clutching the body.

Gorg roared, axe swinging in an arc that sliced through a goblin's skull. Chains rattled. He stabbed again, but a second goblin struck his ribs with its spear. Pain exploded as he staggered back.

Gobol spun his sword in a brutal overhead swing, skewering a goblin through the chest and using its body to block another's thrust. They felled two more swiftly, but the goblins brought axes and torches into flanking positions.

Folga sprang between Yvanna and the dying miner, her staff erupted in radiant pulses. Two goblins screamed and collapsed into smoldering ash, but the number blinded her with bursts of steel. A pain sparked behind her knee as a goblin's blade found flesh; she stumbled forward.

Yvanna kicked aside a goblin's attack and hauled the lifeless body of a miner into her arms—then abandoned it in the hurry to block another blow. Her dagger pierced a goblin's eye; thick blood shot across mossy stone.

The tunnel filled with desperate cries—man, goblin, steel, and terror. Their movements tangled as 40 more goblins pressed through narrow corridors. Then, the party decided to flee.

Gorg grabbed Yvanna by the arm, dragging her backward. "Go! The tunnel end, now!"

Gobol shoved Folga forward. "Move your legs snail!"

Yvanna, tears in her eyes, whispered: "They were marked... they had the right mark—and we failed them, we got them killed."

Gorg wrapped his wounded arm around her shoulder. Gobol knelt to staunch Folga's wound, voice low: "We got out alive—that's not failure at least."

The party left the tunnels , trudging through damp corridors and muddy shafts on the way back to Vindolanda Keep. Their footsteps were heavy, each step weighed by grief and exhaustion. Through winding forest trails, low hills, and quiet paths, they journeyed for a full day—breaking only for water, smothered rations, and brief moments of silent reflection under shaded groves.

By afternoon, Vindolanda's stone walls rose ahead once more. The flag snapping above the keep, the clatter of soldiers in the courtyard—it all felt achingly familiar. They made their way to the barracks, armor scuffed and spirits dim.

Rowan looked up as they entered. His eyes sharpened. "You're back. Tell me what happened."

Gorg spoke first, voice low but resolute. “We failed to save the miners. There were thousands—slaves in cuffs, working in those tunnels. And goblins… a whole damn city beneath the mountain.”

Rowan leaned back, arms crossed. He sighed heavily. “No wonder you failed. It was only the four of you down there—no backup, no support. I can’t spare more men. We’ve got the frontier to defend up top.”

He spat to the corner of the floor. “So be it. Those miners are lost. I don’t know how we could fight hundreds—maybe thousands—of goblins underground. Let’s just pray those ogre shits don’t come crawling out onto the surface.”

Gorg swallowed hard. “We’re sorry. We did everything. We even carried two miners out by force—but they betrayed us. We couldn’t control them. Something… something broken them.”

Rowan let out a deep breath. “Don’t worry about it. You did what you could. And, for now, I have no more tasks for you here.”

The party nodded, acknowledgment tempered by quiet shame. They went off together to the keep’s dinery—an open hall with long benches and a roaring hearth. The cook ladled hearty bowls of venison stew with potatoes and carrots. Gobol lit his pipe, smoke swirling above his head.

They filled tankards with frothy ale and ate in bristled silence, each bite measured.

Yvanna finally broke the stillness. “There’s still a road ahead, we should look for work elsewhere.”

They raised their tankards.

“To the lost miners—and to the road still before us,” Gorg said.

Drobeta

They met Rowan in the courtyard as the sun broke over Vindolanda’s ramparts. Gorg presented a heavy satchel. “We want two horses—battle-ready.” Rowan raised an eyebrow, nodded, and led them to the stable, where two sleek warhorses stood, saddled and armored. The beasts pranced impatiently.

“Six hundred gold,” Rowan said, eyes hard but fair. “They’re fast and strong. Ride them well.” Gorg nodded, transferred the coins, and the horses neighed as they were released to the party.

Their packs were restocked: dried meat, apples, water, torches, rope—all divided carefully. Mounted two by two, they clattered out of the gates. Yvanna rode alongside Gorg, Folga beside Gobol, the forested trail opening before them.

The horses covered ground swiftly. Fields of barley and rye stretched toward the horizon, the wind lifting their manes and echoing in the grasses. At times they passed burned villages—blackened timbers and smoldering hearths—grim reminders of war and goblin raids.

Evenings they threw down camp: horses secured, tents pitched, horses grazing nearby. Under open sky, they shared past-day rations, washed in streams, counted stars.

On the third day they reached the village of Ulpia, a small cluster of cottages and a solitary tavern called the Iron Anvil. The sign swung on iron hinges—a blacksmith's hammer over anvil.

They dismounted, handed reins to a stable hand, and entered the tavern. The warm hearth, heavy wooden tables, and smoky air felt welcoming. A barmaid with soot-stained apron approached.

"What'll it be?" she asked.

"I'll have a plate of pork and cabbage," Gorg said, wiping dust from his brow. Yvanna ordered stew, Folga asked for fish and bread, and Gobol lit his new clay pipe and requested ale.

They ate hungrily; Yvanna bathed in the back room's wash basin. Gobol smoked contentedly, embers glowing softly in the hearth embers.

Folga leaned back and sighed. "These beds—warm and sturdy—are perfect."

Yvanna stirred her stew and nodded. "Tomorrow early, we ride north to Trobeta Keep by the sea."

Gorg took a long draw from his mug. "We're riding far now. Five days to reach the coast. Let's push on after dawn."

Gobol raised his mug. "To fast horses and rest stops!"

They clinked their mugs. Outside, the sunset glinted on windowpanes. In that moment, safe and fed, they let themselves rest—knowing the road to the sea would be long, but their purpose fixed.

In the high tower of Karnath's Reach, Lord Varran dipped his quill in dark ink, the parchment before him sealed under a glyph of secrecy. His words were measured, but grave.

"To Her Majesty Hestella, Queen of Eldenford, Keeper of the Old Oath—I write with a troubled mind. Our King grows distant from sense. His decrees are erratic, his eyes distant as if following something none of us can see. Advisors vanish in silence. Scholars, priests, even dissenting noble sons. I fear he communes with powers not of this world."

The missive sealed, it was sent under the wing of a shadow falcon—one of the few messengers swift enough to cross the border unmarked.

In the courts of Rellbrook and Eastrood, drills were held daily. Boys too young for blades were put to spear. Veterans muttered of a new war, one no one declared. In Sootspire, the noble merchant houses bristled. Taxmen came with soldiers, not scribes. Tariffs on imported silks and metals surged, guildmasters muttered of revolt.

At the heart of it all stood King Rugimund IV. Upon his dais in the Great Hall of Zarothia, he no longer wore the circlet of diplomacy but a new crown—etched with runes and cold as grave silver. The Sword of Mirovend never left his side. Its obsidian edge glinted unnaturally, as if hungering.

Servants whispered it moved when unattended, always pointed toward the east. A priest of Erathis went to bless the blade and never returned. Two weeks later, his robes were found in the garden, scorched at the hem.

The court's silence deepened. Councillors dared not speak out. Each night the King walked the halls with the sword bared, muttering in ancient tongues, his eyes hollowed by firelight.

People in the palace heard sounds in the walls. Voices in forgotten dialects. Some said the blade sang—but only in the voice of those it killed.

And though the kingdom did not yet burn, all could feel it—something was waking beneath the realm, whispering through steel and sovereign alike.

They rode north along the coast as pale dawn broke, the sea breeze crisp against their faces. Salt spray caught on their cloaks. Five hours later, Drobeta Keep came into view atop a low cliff: squat stone walls, a single tower, and just forty guardsmen—five aloft on the battlements, scanning the sea.

At the barracks they found an elf of about sixty summers, silver-streaked hair tied back, seated behind a wooden desk stained with ink. He looked up as they entered.

"I am Elwin," he said quietly. "You must be the riders from Vindolanda. What service do you seek?"

Gorg spoke forward, voice steady. "We seek work—any task that needs doing."

Elwin nodded. "There's a coastal cave near Blackreef Harbor—floods at high tide. Fishermen whisper of strange shapes dragging men into the surf. We need answers. Find what in the nine hells of Lord Mirothal is going on."

They exchanged glances and nodded. "We'll ride out at first light," Yvanna said.

Elwin handed over maps. "Avoid the rising tide. Be careful."

The next morning, mounted again, they rode south along a pebble beach. Blackreef Harbor emerged: a handful of leaning fishing huts, weathered docks, and beached longboats soaking in morning light.

They dismounted and found one of the older fishermen, Harward by name, his face weather-worn, hands knotted like driftwood. He leaned on a broken oar as they approached.

The party formed a half-circle around him. Yvanna spoke gently. “Harward, tell us what happened.”

He shook his head, eyes hollow. “Six of us… led a crew out two tides ago. We found the cave, thought maybe some fish spawn inside. Then the water tossed the boat—men vanished. No scream—just sucked down like whales. They’re dead. Gone forever.”

Folga placed a hand on his shoulder. “They weren’t dragged by ropes—you said strange shapes?”

He spat into the sand. “I don’t know what I saw. But my best friends… gone. Never gonna see them again, no… never.”

He pointed to other huts. “Any others lost?”

Another fisherman near the dock, arms crossed, shook his head. “Six so far. Bodies never recovered. We’re spread thin.”

They spent another hour combing the shoreline. Stones overturned, barnacle-covered rocks inspected, old nets teared apart. No footprints beyond the tide line—just driftwood, seaweed, and that quiet rumble of waves.

As they paused, Yvanna asked, “Anyone else in the caves recently? Trespassers, smugglers?”

Harward furrowed his brow. “Old stories say smugglers used them long ago—for pirate goods. But the cave seals at high tide. Mirrored rock—floods full inside.”

Gorg silenced the murmurs. “We ride tomorrow at dawn. Pack torches, gear. We’ll go in once the tide pulls back.”

Folga and Yvanna swapped equipment, their expressions resolved. Harward watched them from the docks, hope flickering in his sea-glazed eyes.

The party mounted and secured their horses near the beach edge. The wind whipped their cloaks as they prepared for the night. They would return at morning’s turn, ready to face what lay in the dripping depths of that coastal cave.

They followed Harward’s directions and entered the cave just as the tide began pulling back, sea water rushing inward from two narrow fissures. Torches sputtered in damp air as they slipped past barnacle-covered walls onto slick stone.

Eventually they discovered nests of razorfins—striking creatures with sinewy bodies and razor-sharp dorsal fins covered in barnacle-like growths. One lay half-buried in a ledge. It snapped at them, claws scraping the stone as it lunged forward.

The first predator dove toward Yvanna. She fell backward, tumbling into flooded rock pools. Its fin cleaved close, spraying saltwater across her face.

Gorg planted his axe into its ribs and threw Yvanna a hand. She lurched over, swallowed water—and then sank beneath the wave.

“Gorg!” Gobol yelled as Folga flashed light with a swirl of her staff. He called out, “Get her!”

Gorg waded through thigh-deep water to where Yvanna lay unmoving. He squeezed her chest as he knelt above her, cutting her off the freezing spume. Two sharp breaths later, he pressed his mouth to hers and blew hard until her chest drew forcibly, eyes snapping open.

She coughed water over his arm. “Thank you,” she whispered, shivering and pale.

He helped her standing while Gobol and Folga watched with tense voices—they’d fought and slain two more razorfins in the rush of water and light. Yvanna’s breath returned slow but steady.

They sat on jagged rock, soaked cold, unsure which way led further underground. Slosh of water echoed and dripping salt rang against stone—and the tide still blocked the exit.

Eventually the tide receded enough to clear small channels. The party rebooted their torches and followed narrow corridors deeper.

They’d gone twenty paces when six razorfins materialized, eyes glowing in firelight. They hissed—a staccato clip of claws against stone.

“Form up!” Gorg barked, axe raised.

Gobol stepped forward, swinging his sword as two razorfins crouched. He blocked a slash and returned a savage strike that split its jaw. A second lunged at Gorg—axe met fin, but razor tore through leather and flesh. Gorg staggered, roaring before he felled one with a power-cleave down its head. Folga raised staff to channel lights, weaving a narrow beam that struck a beast and forced it to recoil.

Yvanna slashed across its flank with her dagger. The creature screeched, back fins quivering as blood pooled. Another lunged at her from the side; she rolled beneath its bulk and cut its spine mid-thrust, crushing it against stone.

Two razorfins attacked Gobol together. His arms collided with steel as he blocked, his sword arc ended with two swift cuts—carsewed through ribs and neck. One groped at him but he spun into a backward thrust, finishing it.

The final razorfin charged Gorg at pace. Gorg braced and finished it with a single sweep: the blade sank into flesh and cracked bone. The body thudded and slid into the shallow water.

They circled a small pile of bones lodged in a corner. Three rusty helmets lay askew, probably of pirates long ago, and bleached skeletons clutched fragments of fishing nets—definitely fishermen's remains.

Gobol crouched. "They made it in far—but not back out."

Yvanna knelt beside one skeleton. A buckle in the chest—a belt she recognized from Harward's story.

Folga took a deep breath. "They fought to the end. We found them."

Gorg wiped blood from his axe against his cloak. "Let's leave them here in peace."

The cave walls seemed to exhale. They exited cautiously, carrying the memory of those three fishermen they found—and the knowledge that the razorfins had claimed the other three also somewhere deeper in the caves.

The tide was returning. Stepping onto slick stones, the party paused just beyond the waterline. The cave was sealed once more in silence. They had answers and enough terror for now. With their hearts heavy, they rode back to Drobeta Keep at first light. The sea's roar seemed less distant—and forever changed by what had lain beneath the depths.

They rode back to Drobeta Keep under a pale morning sun. After stable chores and washing, they made their way to Elwin's desk in the barracks, armor still damp.

Gorg stepped forward, voice steady. "We entered the coastal cave by Blackreef Harbor. The razorfins were there—and they killed the fishermen. We fought them—six in total. They're all dead, and we discovered three skeletons of your missing men."

Elwin nodded, relief softening his face. "Then the cave is clear. With the tide and razorfins gone, no cause for alarm— unless they return. You did well."

He handed over a small bag of coins. "Fifty gold, as promised." The clatter of coins and their grateful nods echoed in the cell of his voice.

He leaned back, rubbing his chin. "But beyond the sea... King Rugimund grows paranoid. In Karnaths Reach and Zarothia, courtiers vanish—priests, librarians, dissenters… Those tied to House Delmore, Vantell, even royal advisors have disappeared."

Yvanna frowned. "Rumors say the Sword of Mirovend influences him… drinking souls."

Elwin's eyes darkened. "The blade was once a symbol of unity—and blood. Now... it's a conduit. Bloodlines twisted. Ancient magics in hands unworthy."

Gobol leaned forward. "So what's happening? Is war coming—or witch hunts?"

Elwin sighed. “Lord Varran from Karnaths Reach has sent secret missives to Queen Hestella. He says Rugimund questions all oaths, purges his counsel, and drills militias across Eastrood and Rellbrook like he's preparing for war. All trade cities—especially Sootspire and Durgath’s Hollow—pay weighty taxes. Merchant houses bristle.”

Folga’s brow furrowed. “More disappearances?”

Elwin nodded. “Priests of Erathis vanish from their temples. One vanished at Karnaths Reach—walls soaked in blood by dawn. Another... his body not found, just robes abandoned. And rumors whisper the sword glows brighter each night at court, as if feeding on darkness.”

Gorg slammed his fist lightly on the desk. “That sword belonged to King Mirovend—the hero who slayed the first dragon Valathron, uniting Brecklands and Zarothia. Twenty generations of lineage. His bloodline is sacred.”

Elwin’s gaze held a somber respect. “Yes. The lore says Mirovend wed Leda—seven children—the first seeds of the provinces. Now his namesake weapon may doom them all.”

Yvanna clenched her fingers. “These disappearances... we can’t ignore. The realm frays—from Blackreed to Daggerhold now threats in the sea and goblins underground, and now this.”

Gobol tapped the desk. “Maybe it’s time we went south—to Karnaths Reach or beyond—to seek out what’s behind the sword’s hunger.”

Elwin sighed heavily. “Choosing a path to oppose the King is treason. But the realm frays... If more disciples of the sword grow blind to its curse, civil war—or worse—could burn this kingdom."

He regarded them. “You’ve kept this coast safe. If you choose to ride south, you won't lack a cause. But know: you will be hunted as rebels. The sword’s darkness festers in crown and court.”

Gorg exchanged a glance with the others. “We’ll talk it over.”

Elwin raised his hand. “Whatever you decide, know this: power isn’t always forged in steel. Sometimes it dies where mercy fails. Choose well.”

They picked up their cloaks, stepping into the corridor's flickering torchlight with heavy minds. The seas were quiet and the cave sealed behind them. But the path forward through crowns, curses, and kingdoms lay shadowed—but calling them still deeper.

The fire in the barracks hearth crackled low as the party sat around a rough wooden table, the scent of sea salt still clinging to their cloaks. Gorg set his gauntlets on the table with a weary thud and leaned back, his expression unreadable. A half-drained mug of ale rested in front of Gobol, who tapped the rim with his pipe, the embers glowing faintly in the dim room.

“I don’t like it,” Gorg said finally, breaking the silence. “That sword. It was buried for a reason. It drinks blood, twists minds. We saw it with our own eyes in the cathedral. Now it’s in the hands of a king who whispers to it in dreams.”

Yvanna shifted in her seat, brushing mud from her boots. “And if what Elwin says is true, Rugimund isn’t just whispering back. He’s listening. The purges, the drills, the vanishing people... it’s not coincidence. That blade’s making him believe he’s chosen.”

Folga set her spellbook down with a sigh, her fingers tense around the spine. “The blade’s tied to the founding of the kingdom. If the King believes himself a new Mirovend, he might think he’s meant to reshape the realm. Unify it, as the old texts say. But unity by force is conquest. And that sword… it doesn’t bring peace. It brings power.”

Gobol took a long draw from his pipe and exhaled a ribbon of smoke. “What if he believes the nobles are traitors? Or the priesthood? If he’s seeing enemies in shadows, he’ll bring fire and steel to every city that questions him.”

Yvanna narrowed her eyes. “And we gave him that sword. We handed it to Mithander who sent it to court. Gods, we didn’t know... but now?”

“There’s no going back,” Gorg muttered. “But we can go forward. If this kingdom burns, I want to be ready to strike, not watch from behind a tavern table.”

Folga leaned forward. “The sword’s history—Mirovend didn’t live long after wielding it. It took him too. I’ve read the tales. His mind went… fogged. Angry. He died not in glory but in silence, locked in a sanctum with blood on his hands.”

Gobol grunted. “So what then? We ride south and try to take it back? It’s at the King’s side. You’d need an army.”

“No,” Yvanna said quietly. “We need truth. Proof. If we can show the realm what the sword is, what it does... maybe someone listens. Queen Hestella, Lord Varran, even the Church of Erathis. We need allies. And fast.”

Outside the barracks, sea wind rattled the shutters, carrying the call of gulls across the darkening coast. The four of them sat in the flickering light, the warmth of the fire unable to burn away the growing chill in their thoughts. A king unraveling. A sword that whispered. And a kingdom poised on the edge of a blade.

Karnath’s Reach

The sea journey from Drobeta Keep to Karnath’s Reach began with a sky grey as tarnished steel and the ship—Merchant’s Dream—creaking under the weight of age and disrepair. It was no vessel meant for passengers, only a returning husk of a merchant ship with empty crates and frayed ropes that snapped like whips in the salt wind. The party climbed aboard on

a fog-drenched morning, the scent of rotting fish and old timber clinging to the air like an omen.

The captain, Hootz—a thin man with a voice like a rusty anchor chain—greeted them not with welcome but with a warning. “No stops,” he spat, yellow eyes squinting into the drizzle. “We sail straight for Karnath’s Reach. If you get sick, die quiet. And don’t touch my helm.” His hand rested protectively on the wheel, blistered fingers twitching as if even the air dared disobey him.

Their quarters were little more than a cramped wooden box beneath the deck, rank with dampness and the scurry of rats. The bunks were rough-sawn planks, slick with sea-sweat, and infested with lice. Water dripped through the ceiling beams in steady plinks, and cockroaches scuttled in every crevice. They were given no meals by the crew, who barely looked at them except to jeer. With only a sack of stale biscuits, a wedge of hard cheese, and a skin of water between them, the party rationed in whispers and hunger. By the fifth day, they shared a crust of bread like it were holy sacrament. Folga, pale and shivering, collapsed on the sixth day, lips cracked and skin clammy. Gobol held her in his arms while Yvanna dripped the last of the water onto her tongue.

When they asked the captain if they might stop at Blackreed Keep or Mudwater Haven to restock, Hootz snarled and laughed without humor. “Stop? So what, you can climb off and buy fruit like rich nobles? This isn’t a pleasure ship, whelps. You’re lucky I let you rot aboard it at all.”

One night, as thunder rolled across black waves and the ship pitched like a wounded beast, the party gathered near the helm, listening to Hootz tell a tale in the half-light of a swinging lantern. “Near Seabreeze Keep,” he growled, “she came aboard—silver hair, seaweed skin, and hands cold as regret. Climbed up the hull and nearly crushed the breath from my neck.” He limped to a wooden closet and yanked it open, pulling out a taxidermied head, mottled with scales and glassy eyes like sunken pearls. “She’s proof. Sirens are real. And they hate men.”

Three storms struck the ship before Karnath’s Reach ever came in sight. Waves rose like walls of slate, rain pelted the sails like arrows, and the crew shouted curses to gods long since drowned. Hootz clung to the wheel, screaming defiance into the gale. Lightning cracked open the heavens and revealed the trembling hull, the tattered sails flapping like a dying bird’s wings. Gobol puked over the side twice, Yvanna prayed into the void, and Gorg tightened the ropes with bloodied hands, face grim and silent.

When at last the cliffs of Karnath’s Reach broke the horizon, the party resembled wretches—clothes torn, skin salt-bitten, eyes sunken and haunted. As they staggered off the ship onto the stone docks of the city, the towers of the capital loomed in the distance, wreathed in smoke and shadow.

Their path led forward now—to the heart of the realm, and the truth buried behind a crown and a cursed sword. But the sea had taken its price, and the stains of that voyage would never fully wash away.

They stumbled into *The White Whale*, a smoke-dark tavern nestled against Karnath's Reach docks. Their boots squelched on damp planks, and Gobol clutched his pipe as he pushed open the door. Inside, low lantern light revealed rough wooden tables and salt-scented benches.

They seated themselves at a corner table. Gorg raked his axe free of sea crust, voice hollow: "Food. And something hot." Yvanna ordered stew, Folga asked for fish and greens, and Gobol nodded for ale as if it might mend cracked bones.

They barely touched their meals—swallowing each bite with heavy breaths. Then, without complaint, they moved wordlessly to a dorm room above the tavern. Their bunks creaked under exhausted forms—Yvanna's fingers still trembling around dagger handles. Within minutes, they slept.

Across Zarothia, that night—and for many nights following—people dreamed of firestorms on the horizon, horns blowing mournful oaths, and black tides swallowing cities whole. Mothers woke children, wives pulled spouses from sleep with trembling whispers of omens.

Meanwhile, after weeks of physical rest, Gobol took to the city libraries dusty archives. He poured over ancient tomes and discovered a secret carved in fading runes: Velthurog the Sealed—an infernal demon bound within Mirovend's sword. The older texts described how the blade, when drawn in anger, released fragments of the demon's essence, whispering promises of power in exchange for blood and dominion.

One afternoon, Folga interrupted Gobol's grim fascination with a revelation of her own. Among the new knightly order known as *The Crimson Oath*—men bound not by civil law but by arcane blood rites—she found a name meant to stand guard over the people: Ser Eltrik Vane. Yet Vane's early years had tied him to a cult devoted to the downfall of Mirovend—a sect that celebrated the king's demise and the dissolution of his oath-bound unity.

They gathered late that night in the tavern's back room. The fire burned low and stale smoke curled around their cloaks.

Gorg spoke first, voice quiet: "So the sword binds a demon... And now the king's knights—who salute in blood—serve men like Vane. A demand to choose... And it's not law. It's horror."

Yvanna's bow lay across her lap. She nodded. "If that order takes guard posts in every city... we will see the sword's will spread across our streets."

Gobol exhaled a low curse. "Velthurog yearns for release. And Vane? He'll be the key. He'll know how to free it."

Folga closed her spellbook softly. Her eyes were determined but weary. “We can’t fight swords or armies. But we can cast light on the truth. We can expose Vane. We can warn the realm—and gather allies before the Oath consumes them all.”

Gorg’s hand curled into a fist. “Then we ride for Karnath’s Reach tomorrow. We speak with Lord Varran, with Queen Hestella if possible. We present these books, these names. We warn them before the knife comes at every council door.”

They raised their cups to a silent vow—though their voices were soft, their resolution carried strength: to stand against darkness born in steel, consecrated in blood, and masked in the oath of loyal knights.

The short journey to Karnath’s Reach mapped itself in their minds as the only path forward—and peril or no peril, they would walk it together.

The gates of Karnath’s Reach loomed high and iron-bound, flanked by stone lions darkened by centuries of soot and rain. As the party approached, tired and road-worn, Gorg knocked his gauntlet against the guard-post iron. A young officer stepped forward, face stony beneath his helmet.

"We request audience with Lord Varran," Folga said, lifting her mage’s seal.

"Denied," the guard replied without pause. "And the Queen sees no one uninvited. Return to the lower quarter or be escorted."

Gorg muttered under his breath, gripping his axe haft, but Gobol touched his arm.

"No point cracking heads that sit higher than ours," he said grimly.

They turned back, passing through the crowded streets where rumors clung to every stone like fog. A tanner muttered of taxes doubled. A dockworker spoke of patrols replaced by crimson-cloaked knights. Along the riverfront, Zarothian flags flew beside royal banners—an insult to Sootspire by all measure. The name "Blackbeard" kept coming up in low voices, and always with a scowl.

By the second day, word came that Coldwater Bridge had burned red with blood. Eighty men dead in a skirmish where neither side was supposed to draw arms. But the new tolls enraged Sootspire merchants, and when they refused to pay, steel answered. The King’s decree followed like thunder—traitors, he called them. The Sootspire Lords, centuries-old allies of the throne, now hunted for disloyalty.

In their rented room above the White Whale tavern, lit only by a single flickering lantern, Yvanna collapsed onto her bed without speaking. Her breath caught. Her fingers trembled.

"Yvanna?" Folga asked.

Yvanna’s eyes rolled back—and she screamed.

The walls faded. She saw black iron shackles nailed into marble, and a man—no, a shade of a man—his golden crown shattered, flesh peeled to bone, his mouth forced open with blades. Mirovend. The sword floated before him, pulsing with hunger.

"It must never leave the King's hand!" Mirovend wailed, a scream that tore at the stars. "Or the world is bled anew! Do not let it taste mortal blood! Not again! Not again!"

She jolted awake, drenched in sweat, gasping.

"The sword... it's not just cursed," she said, voice hoarse. "It is a prison. And if it feeds again..."

No one in the room spoke for a long while. Gorg finally said, "Then we must decide—who do we fear more? The King… or what waits inside that blade?"

Silence hung like a noose. Outside, the wind shifted, and the bells of Karnath's Reach tolled low.

Martial law was declared in the twenty-third hour, as a cold rain slicked the copper roofs of Karnath's Reach. Before dawn, black flags bearing the sword-and-hand insignia of the Crimson Oath unfurled from every barracks tower. Town criers were gagged, replaced by armored heralds who nailed writs of conscription and submission to doors with blood-red wax.

By midday, columns of armored riders moved east and south.

Blaneforth was first to resist.

The mayor, Eldric Holway, had closed the gates and refused the conscription demands. He had stood atop the city walls in defiance, reading aloud the Charter of Unity that had once bound Zarothia and Brecklands together.

That night, Blaneforth was ash.

The screams began at the eastern gate, where firebombs rained from trebuchets pulled by oxen. Families fled into the streets only to be cut down by mounted oathsworn knights. Women were dragged from root cellars, elders burned in their beds. By morning, the central spire of the Temple of Alruen was a black husk and its priest found crucified to its iron door. The fields beyond Blaneforth smoked for days.

In the west, Greenmere Hold fell without a sword drawn.

The garrison captain, Sir Verniel, surrendered under the King's seal, believing his men would be spared. Instead, the Crimson Oath took his men's weapons, then marched them into the nearby lake and drowned them in chains.

Greenmere's walls were painted red in the blood of its garrison before being renamed Wyrmbrand Bastion. Within the week, prison wagons arrived under cover of night, bringing

bound nobles from across the Brecklands—merchants, dissenting knights, sons of rival houses, scholars. Any whose loyalty had not been sworn in blood.

A woman named Brisella of House Darn was dragged screaming from her manor in Illgard for refusing to pledge her banners to the King. Her children were found later, silent and shivering beneath floorboards, clutching a torn flag of Sootspire.

Whispers swirled that the dungeons beneath Wyrmbrand Bastion had changed. That prisoners were not merely held—but bled, marked, and whispered to in the dark. That their dreams were harvested, their blood weighed in silver bowls.

And in every village, from the marshlands of Grendon to the mountain edge of Thornspike, men in crimson cloaks arrived with scrolls. Those who signed were given a pittance and a sword. Those who refused saw their farms turned to black glass.

The King's voice had grown louder.

And it echoed now in the mouths of his knights.

The King's invitation to a peace summit arrived with golden flourish—but beneath its shine lay treachery.

At the neutral monastery of High Scriptorum, monks lit candles in quiet cloisters to welcome envoy banners from Karnath's Reach and Sootspire: flags of hope joined under the vow of peace. But in the night, while emissaries slept beside iron-wrought beds, alchemical fire swept through the halls. Bitter-sweet fumes exploded into flame, stone shrieked, ancient texts turned to ash. The structure burned from within, embers raining and prayers choking in smoke.

King Rugimund IV addressed the realm via herald at dawn: Sootspire is entirely responsible. In his words, they burned the sacred halls to stoke rebellion. He declared Sootspire traitors once more and set his banners toward the city with a massive army under Crimson Oath banners.

Meanwhile, across Karnath's Reach, shadows moved in whispers. Secret agents loyal to Lord Varran began seeking out the party, asking for proof of the sword's corruption—proof they alone possessed.

One evening, behind a hidden panel in a ruined scholarly tower, Folga met with Ithras of Kellenmoor—a scholar long banned for theories deemed heretical. He emerged from candlelit gloom, robes tattered and eyes haunted.

"Your Lord Rugimund bears the Sword of Mirovend," he said, voice soft as echo. "You believe it cursed by history. But you do not yet know its birth guilt."

He pulled a brittle scroll of old parchment and unrolled it, revealing a faded image: a godling, crowned with starlight, bound in chains of iron and sorrow. "The sword once drank the

essence of a godling—one of Mirovend's original bloodline. The blade absorbed divinity—and thus cursed his lineage. It poisoned his successors before blood ever touched steel."

Folga leaned in, folded hands trembling. "Explain."

Ithras continued: "The godling was offered in devotion by Mirovend's kin—trusting in the sword's sanctity. Instead, the blade consumed the divine spark, silencing it. The godling's essence became part of the steel—giving it voice, hunger, influence. That is why the sword must touch no mortal blood."

He traced a finger over the rune beneath the drawing. "It was bound with seals—never meant to slay kings again. If drawn in blood, its master becomes breathless—his mind bent. And kingdoms perish thereafter."

Folga closed her eyes and exhaled. "Mirovend's heir—in blood and power—carried death within his sword."

"It is proof, not superstition," Ithras said flatly. "You have hold of the truth. Present it. Or let darkness be your lie."

Night deepened outside; wind rattled broken shutters. Folga nodded, firm with resolve—and the scholar's secret burned brighter in her mind.

Across the realm, as armies moved and fires lapped at the walls, the party understood more clearly their place. They carried evidence of a broken line, a cursed blade, and a future spun between oath and oblivion.

In the northern woods near Ashbarrow, whispers of green defiance stirred beneath the canopy. Remnants of the Druidic Order, thought scattered or dead, gathered once more under the oaths of the old forest rites. They had been watching, waiting, marking each crimson banner and each sacred tree felled in the name of war. They called themselves the Hollowbound Circle and claimed the King had shattered the ancient Pact of the Three Stones—an accord inked in blood and root between nature, man, and spirit over seven hundred years ago. That pact, signed at the Standing Stones of Eldovar, forbade any ruler from draining the forest's veins or waging war upon sacred ground.

But King Rugimund had defied that vow when his armies razed the grove at Stonehearth to expand his timber reach. To the Hollowbound Circle, that was no mere crime—it was a declaration of war upon the spirit of the world.

One damp autumn night, as owl feathers stirred the air and moonlight swam through the mist, the Crimson Oath descended upon the Hollowbound. Forty riders came under shadow, their helms unlit, their blades unclean. By dawn, the glade of Oakrest Hollow was silent but for the crows, who circled blood-black branches and drank from still puddles of slaughter.

When the prince arrived, the carnage still steamed.

Prince Halrik, second son of Rugimund, had ridden against orders—draped not in armor but in hunter's garb. When he saw what remained of the druids, their scorched runes and shattered antler-crowns, he did not speak for many breaths. The youngest of the grove, barely a boy, still clutched a stone totem in his ruined hand. Halrik stared at the faces of the fallen, a single truth blooming like poison: this was not the realm he had sworn to defend.

He rode straight to Karnath’s Reach.

In the stone halls of the high keep, Halrik stood before his father, flanked by knights in red.

“You’ve lost the pact,” the prince said, voice low. “You’ve turned from balance. This war is not righteous. It is cursed.”

Rugimund’s eyes were colder than the sword on his hip. “You speak like traitors, son. And traitors need no crown.”

The prince’s badge of station was torn from his chest. Without title, without place, Halrik turned and left the keep—not in rage, but in silence.

But not in surrender.

And the wind through the northern trees carried his name.

The disowned Prince Halrik rode north beneath a hood of ash-grey wool, his escort no longer royal, his mission no longer burdened with titles. He passed through marshes, wild hillocks, and moss-cloaked woods, following only rumors of the party that had once cleansed the deep cathedrals of old rot and broken the lairs of dark things. In three days, he found them—camped in a glade not far from an abandoned mill, smoke curling from Gobol’s pipe, Folga murmuring over a book, and Gorg sharpening his axe with slow, angry strokes.

He dismounted without flourish and approached the fire, eyes drawn with fatigue but steady.

“I am no prince now,” Halrik said. “But I know secrets that may help end this.”

The party exchanged glances. Yvanna lowered her hand from her bowstring.

“What kind of secrets?” Gorg asked, spitting to the side.

Halrik lowered his pack and from it drew a weatherworn map—hand-drawn and inked in fading red lines.

“There are vaults beneath Karnath’s Reach—buried chambers sealed since Mirovend's time. The sword sleeps there, at times, in its shrine. I studied the old charts. There are passageways that lead beneath the inner citadel. Few remember them, fewer trust them. I can guide you in.”

Folga leaned forward, brow furrowed. “And why betray your blood, Halrik? Is guilt what you offer us?”

The prince stared into the fire. “Not guilt. A chance to save what my father is destroying. He no longer hears counsel—only the sword’s whisper.”

Gobol tapped out his pipe on a log and said, “Then we’d best start listening to other voices.”

In the days that followed, the party consulted their growing archive of grim knowledge. It was Gobol who found it—scrawled in a dusty folio taken from a Sootspire merchant long ago. It spoke of a ritual. A cleansing rite. To sever a relic’s hold over its bearer, you needed more than spell or sword.

You needed a soul. Pure. Willing. Not bound to ambition or vengeance. A sacrifice not forced but offered.

The words were chilling:

“Only the blood of one untainted by the world’s lust—given freely—may cleanse the vessel that drank god-blood. Else, the vessel endures forever.”

Folga looked up from the page. “To break the sword’s hold... someone must die. Willingly. Without vengeance in their heart.”

No one spoke for a while. The fire crackled. Wind rustled the leaves. Gorg stirred the coals with a stick, jaw tight.

“Well,” Gobol muttered, “that complicates things.”

In Cairnbourne the fracture was slow and bitter. Barracks once full of knights rang with renewed drills. Noble banners hung at half-mast beneath crimson standards. Some lords, fearful of the King’s wrath, pledged fresh oaths to Rugimund—legally binding, blood-binding—sealing levy rolls and tax rights in hand-shake pledges. Other lords, especially those of the western baronies, sent knights to secret training grounds deep in forests and hills. Archers sharpened their bows at dawn. Blacksmiths hammered new blades. Cavalry practiced maneuvers by moonlit glades. Training exercises looked practiced—citizen militia trained in arrow drills and skirmishing, shadowed by masked instructors hired from Sootspire mercenaries.

The courthouses of Cairnbourne echoed with whispered discussions of revolt, with hidden fund ledgers passed beneath the tables. Sootspire’s nobles sent horsemen across the border—masked and unmarked—to meet with discontented lords. Supplies were hidden in abandoned mills and dry wells. Word spread that the Crimson Oath had no loyalty to law, only obedience to the sword—and some lords refused to pledge.

In the cramped corridors of Karnath’s Reach palace, the party learned—through secret agents loyal to Lord Varran—of further darkness. Queen Hestella’s quarters had been sealed under night-curfew, her guards replaced by Crimson Oath inquisitors in scarlet cloaks who whispered threats through reinforced doors. No prayers emerged. No letters passed. She had not been seen at court since the summit burned at High Scriptorum.

They obtained schedules showing guards' rotations at her suite. Gilded tapestries had been slit on prison hinges. Food trays arrived untouched. Tall windows were barred at twilight and lit only by torch-flame. One prisoner—just recently released from Wyrmbrand Bastion—swore he heard her cries under the floorboards.

They exchanged grim glances in dim taverns when the candlelight shimmered.

"She wasn't rebellious," Folga murmured. "Only silent. But silence carries weight to wrong ears."

"I fear she knows too much," Gobol added. "They prefer obedient tongues—or no tongues at all."

Gorg's fingers tightened on the table. "So Cairnbourne fractures—with silent nobility, hidden weapons, and a queen in chains beneath the crown."

They settled into thought, their cups cold with resolve—knowing that the realm would fracture further unless they acted—soon.

By the veil of night, the party moved like smoke beneath Karnath's Reach, their steps muffled against rain-slick cobblestone and rotting hay tossed in alley gutters. They entered the palace by the outer granary tunnel, bypassing guard posts through sewer grates and half-buried service shafts long sealed by disuse. They climbed the servant stairs beneath the wine cellars, blades drawn, torches snuffed.

The Crimson Oath had grown lax in their certainty—six inquisitors patrolled the Queen's wing, their scarlet tabards shining like blood in torchlight. The first two died without sound—Gorg and Gobol striking in unison, axes and daggers gliding between ribs and through throats. The third inquisitor raised a half-formed prayer before Folga's spell froze his lungs. Yvanna's arrows silenced the fourth and fifth, the bolts slipping through their necks like thorns through parchment. The sixth fought fiercely, drawing a curved blade and chanting words that made blood bead in their ears. He cut Gobol across the cheek and nearly cleaved Folga's spellbook, but Gorg caught him by the spine and sundered it with a sickening snap.

They kicked open the Queen's door.

She sat in darkness, her eyes turned to the corner of the room where no one stood. Her lips moved, but the words were quiet, trailing into silence. Her once-immaculate dress was dulled with dust, and the silver in her hair had spread like frost. On the floor lay strange charcoal drawings of twisted suns with antlers, eyes dripping black ichor, and tangled root-like crowns. Her bed had not been slept in. Candles flickered as if uneasy.

"You… came," she said, not rising. "Or is this the final vision?"

"We're real, my lady," Yvanna said gently, touching her arm.

“Not all things real are just,” Hestella replied, her voice distant. “The horned sun rises beneath the sea. It speaks through teeth. It whispers through ash. The King dreams of it now, night after night… and so do I.”

The party exchanged grim glances.

“We must take her from this place,” Folga said, eyes lingering on the symbols scorched into the floorboards. “The sword is no longer content with one bearer. It’s reaching out. Bleeding into dreams, into the air itself.”

Outside, as they made their escape, clouds swelled unnaturally above Brecklands. The sky was no longer gray—it was bruised, darkening in veins of violet and coal-black. Thunder cracked where no storm should be, and carrion birds circled aimlessly in clusters.

Even the land had begun to listen.

From the northern edges of Old Thornhill, a creeping rot had begun its silent march—first in the roots of barley, then in the veins of pigs, and finally in the hearts of men. Fields once golden now lay blackened, with stalks knotted like bone spindles and soil oozing with a slick, coppery sheen. In the woods nearby, deer were born with mouths full of human teeth. Birds fell from trees without reason, their wings twisted or fused. Even hounds refused to sniff the air, whining and retreating from windless meadows.

The villagers whispered of the executions—how Rugimund had emptied his prisons, slaughtered dissenters by the hundreds, and ordered their remains fed to the earth “so it would remember loyalty.” Now the land did remember—but not in reverence.

The party, alerted by passing refugees and sickened farmers, rode northward through the tainted farmlands. Their boots sank into corrupted muck, and they wrapped their faces in cloth soaked with vinegar to block the stench. Folga knelt and gathered a sample of soil, sniffed, then grimaced.

“There’s blood here. Human. Something else, too—something old, and wrong.”

Alchemical scholars in Thornhill’s abandoned guildhall confirmed the fear: the very land was poisoned, made fertile not with decay but with hatred. The King’s acts of cruelty had awakened ancient forces, ones that would not rest while blood still watered the fields.

Desperate for answers beyond mortal reach, the party traveled through forest paths forgotten by time, seeking the Circle of Orinath—the reclusive monks once banished for opposing King Mirovend's holy wars. In a hidden glen of stone arches and weeping birches, they were welcomed by the hooded Brother Telvyn, whose eyes were glazed with silver mist.

“We warned them,” he said, leading them into the moss-covered crypt where his order had slept, studied, and watched. “The sword is no weapon—it is a wound, shaped into steel. It does not crave flesh. It craves intent. War, conflict, betrayal—these are its feast. The more blood it spills, the more awake it becomes.”

Gorg stepped forward. “Is there a way to stop it?”

“There may be,” Telvyn said. “Long before Mirovend, there was a vault built to silence things like this. The Unblinking Tomb. A place outside of death, where light neither flickers nor fades. Within it sleeps a relic—untouched by oath or curse—that might counter the blade’s call.”

“But beware,” he added, his voice low. “The tomb is sealed by a vow forgotten by most: that no man of power may approach it. You’ll need humility, and something more—pain that has not healed.”

As the party looked to one another in silence, the birches around them swayed in a breeze they could not feel, and the mist whispered like the breath of something old listening beneath the soil.

Smoke rose from Sootspire like incense from a broken altar, curling high into the roiling clouds that no longer obeyed wind nor season. Thunder groaned overhead, though no rain fell—just ash, drifting like snow across shattered cobbles and the blistered shields of the defenders. The siege had begun in full, and the sound of it was a dirge of wood splintering, men screaming, and the hollow boom of siege engines groaning beneath chains bound with elemental fire.

The city’s famed magical wards, once drawn by star-aligned magi in spiral towers now long dead, cracked like old ice. Flaming stones launched by catapults wreathed in runes arced through the sky, each hit shaking the old city to its bones. Golems of granite, chained spirits of wind and coal fire, groaned under their bindings as they powered the King’s war machines—things not built, but conjured. One tower collapsed in a thunderclap, its sigils bursting into flame as it toppled into the north ward.

Within Sootspire’s cracked outer wall, the party gathered in the council cellar beneath the Hall of Weavers, listening to the reports of dwindling food, exhausted mages, and dying soldiers. Choices hung thick in the air.

“We can’t stay and die with the city,” said Folga, spreading her maps. “There’s something deeper—older. I found a passage in a surviving Scriptorum text, something the monks of Orinath must’ve missed. The Last Bell.”

Gobol looked up from sharpening his blade. “A bell? We’re talking about breaking a demon with a bell now?”

Folga nodded. “The Last Bell was cast in the age of fractured gods. It was meant to banish immortals, seal breaches between worlds. It was once housed in the Chapel of Nine Faces—ruined now, forgotten. But I believe Velthurog’s presence can still be drawn to it... and undone.”

Yvanna stared out the slitted window at the siege fire painting the sky red. “And if we stay?”

Gorg tightened his grip on his axe. “We buy time. Fight in the alleys, the bridges, make them bleed for every inch.”

But the sword... it no longer whispered. It shouted. Screamed. Soldiers loyal to Rugimund marched as if puppeted, their eyes glassy, their voices echoing foreign syllables. The King himself had not been seen in weeks. Reports said he no longer spoke to council, nor slept—only stood before his throne in the vaults, speaking to the blade alone.

Sootspire held—for now. But barely. Bodies littered the aqueducts. Mages choked on blood as they tried to rekindle the failing wards. The east tower was held by a single knight and a fire-drake with torn wings.

And still, the party had to choose: defend what was left, infiltrate the royal host to find the root of madness, or chase the bell that might toll the end of all this. The city waited. The sword hungered. And in the rubble of hope, the last breath of peace died.

It was Gobol who first traced the path, piecing together fragments in ruined scrolls, words half-burned and ink faded by time. The Last Bell, once mounted in the Chapel of Nine Faces—deep in the pine-blanketed hills of Tarnwyn Vale—was said to toll only in the presence of unmaking, a divine sound to unseat the unnatural. Folga found references to it in the marginalia of forbidden priestly texts, and Yvanna, in a rare moment of silence, swore she had heard its sound once before, in a dream of light crumbling through ash. Even Gorg, skeptic and scarred, agreed: if there was a chance to end the sword’s reign without killing a king or starting a war, they had to take it.

The journey was long. Through crags littered with fallen sigils, through forests where nothing grew straight, where even the owls had gone silent. The Chapel lay in ruins beneath overgrowth and frost, its faces—each one carved in the likeness of an ancient god or guardian—smashed and buried. Moss grew thick between cracked tiles. Moonlight did not enter its broken halls. Only the sound of dripping water and the scrape of boots over shattered glass guided them.

The bell tower still stood. Just barely.

They climbed the stone steps, weapons in hand, hope rising like a fragile flame.

And there it was.

The bell.

Or what remained of it.

Its brass ribs lay in pieces across the floor of the tower, warped as if torn by great claws. The clapper had been melted into slag. Runes once etched around its rim had been gouged out by teeth or blades—no mortal force could have done this. At the base, a smear of ash formed the outline of a creature large as a horse, now long vanished. Folga dropped to her knees, her hand brushing over the edges of the bell’s corpse.

“It knew,” she whispered.

Gobol stood back, eyes sunken. “Velthurog came here. Long ago. Before we even knew to seek this place. It destroyed the one thing that could undo it.”

“No,” said Yvanna quietly. “It didn’t destroy it. It fed on it. That sound—that final toll—it must have screamed as it died. And the sword drank every echo.”

Gorg said nothing. He simply turned, one hand clenching the haft of his axe until the leather creaked.

They left the chapel that night in silence, the bell nothing more than broken brass and memory. But in its ruin, a truth was made plain. There would be no cleansing toll. No sacred sound. The only way forward was through shadow.

The bell was broken.

Night hung low over the hills south of Karnath’s Reach as the royal war camp spread like a web of flame and iron across the valley. Tents of scarlet and black flapped in the wind, their spires illuminated by cold lanternlight and the dim flicker of cookfires. Standards bearing the crimson serpent of Rugimund’s new reign snapped overhead. The sentries—half-starved but utterly loyal—marched with hollow eyes and white-knuckled grips on their polearms. Thunder whispered again in the sky. The land itself seemed to hold its breath.

With Prince Halrik’s forged sigil and whispered passage through secret sentry lines, the party approached the edge of the encampment. Disguised beneath rough cloaks and mud-soaked armor, they moved like shadows, threading between stacked supplies and war tents. Gobol kept low, his eyes locked on the great central pavilion where the King had taken residence. Gorg moved without sound, only the faint grind of his axe hilt betraying his tension. They had come for one purpose: end the Sword of Mirovend’s reign, sever its hold before it dragged the entire realm into ash.

Inside the war pavilion, King Rugimund sat alone beneath the hanging banners of his ancestors. The sword was laid across his lap, humming audibly now—each note like the gnash of grinding teeth. His crown rested on the floor beside him, as if forgotten, and in his face was the weariness of a man half-consumed.

The tent parted. Prince Halrik stepped through with the party at his back.

“Father,” Halrik said, voice taut, “you must listen. This ends tonight. You must give up the sword.”

Rugimund’s eyes flickered up. There was something other than madness in his gaze—something vast and ancient, as though another will looked through him. “You came with knives in the dark,” he said coldly, “and you speak of peace?”

Yvanna stepped forward. “We came to sever the curse. To free you.”

Gorg did not wait. He strode forward and pointed his axe to the floor. “No blood if it can be helped. But let go of that thing, Rugimund. Or by my gods, I will tear it from your spine.”

The sword glowed, veins of coal-fire racing along its edge. Rugimund stood slowly, lifting the weapon. “You would defy your king?”

“We defy the thing that’s puppeting you,” Folga snapped.

Halrik took a step forward, voice trembling. “Let them try the rite, Father. Please. If even a part of you remains…”

Rugimund paused. Something passed over his face. For a heartbeat, the fire died in his eyes.

Folga began to chant. Words of ancient tongue, taught by Ithras of Kellenmoor, echoed through the air. Gobol knelt, drawing symbols with chalk and ash, a circle to trap the sword’s essence. Yvanna held her breath, fingers tightening around her charms. The ritual pulsed with power.

Then the sword shrieked.

A blast of dark heat knocked everyone back. The runes shattered like glass. The circle burned itself into cinders. Folga screamed as blood burst from her nose. The sword hovered in midair and then flared—rejecting the rite entirely.

“It must be destroyed…” Gorg muttered, his voice ragged. “But not here. Not now. Not without war. It feeds on conflict.”

In the confusion, Crimson Oath guards stormed the tent.

Halrik turned, blade drawn to defend them—but a spear burst through his chest.

He crumpled, eyes wide.

Gorg bellowed, cleaving a path toward him, but it was too late. Blood soaked the floor. The King screamed—not in grief, but in rage—as the sword flew from his hand, twisting upward into a burst of flame and shadow. With a sound like thunder cracking stone, it vanished.

The King fell to his knees, howling.

The sword was gone.

But the damage had been done. Halrik lay dead, and in his place a martyr had been born.

Within hours, word of the Prince’s death spread like fire in dry grass. Noble houses loyal to Halrik’s memory lit their banners in mourning—and defiance. Those clinging to the Crimson Oath dug in their heels. Karnath’s Reach would not stand united again.

A new civil war had begun. Not over thrones or crowns—but over the soul of the realm itself.

The war ends not in triumph, but in ash and fracture. Brecklands lies broken, its fields burnt and villages hollow, ruled now by petty lords clinging to titles dulled by loss. Zarothia fares no better—its noble lines decimated, keeps gutted, and blood soaking into once-fertile valleys. Smoke lingers above the ruins of cities once whispered in awe. The banners of the Crimson Oath burn alongside their creed, their black sigil smeared beneath boot and fire. No victors walk from this war, only survivors.

King Rugimund is gone.

No one sees him fall. No sword strike claims him. No grave is dug. In the shattered remains of Karnath's Reach, beneath the melted throne room and its altar of cracked obsidian, he vanishes. A thousand rumors rise like steam—some say he was swallowed by the sword itself, others that he walked into the void laughing, hand still gripping the blade. But no one finds the body.

Only Gobol remains in the ruins long after the others leave. In the still, empty heart of the palace, he finds what remains of the Sword of Mirovend: three broken fragments scattered across the dust-caked stones beneath the altar. Each piece hums—low, mournful, alive. As he gathers them, he feels the same old weight coil in his chest. The same whisper just beyond the edge of hearing. He wraps them in cloth and says nothing.

The party drifts apart.

Yvanna retreats to the western hills, haunted by symbols she sees in falling leaves and the swirl of ash. Gorg returns to the frontier villages, carving a quiet path among broken people, always watching the horizon. Folga vanishes into monastery archives, searching for names older than kings. Gobol simply walks—across rivers, through burnt woods, never staying long, always with the sword's remains hidden beneath his cloak.

But the dreams continue.

They dream of horns. Of flame devouring cities. Of oceans black as ink swallowing towers and temples. And always the sword is there—rebuilt, resplendent, beckoning.

One evening, as the sun sets red over the horizon, Yvanna sends a letter to the others, short and shaking in ink.

"It is not over," she writes. "The sword is never sated. Only sleeping."

And they understand then, what none of the battles had revealed.

The war was never for the land.

It was for the legacy that would shape the lands to come.